

クロス・ファイア

精靈使ひの剣舞

ブレイドダンス

志瑞祐

Illustration
桜はんぺん





「エミト、どうしたのですか？」

エ、エスト……

その、せ、背中にあたつてる

エストは首を傾げ、
石鹼の泡にまみれた身体を、
さらにぴたつと密着させてくる。

……この状況はマズイ。
マズすぎる。

エスト





カミトはドギマギと顔を赤らめながら言った
水に濡れた制服が、エリスの肢体に
ぴったりとはりついて
なんとも艶めかしい。

「喋らなくていい。
体力を消耗するぞ」

Kazhaya Kamito
カゼハヤ・カミト

カミトは、制服姿のままのエリスを
水の中に横たえた。

「すま、ない、カミト……」

Eris Fahrenheit
エリス・ファーレンガルト

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Bladedance of Elemental er

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Created on: 28/04/2013

Bladedance of Elemental er

Volume 09

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Prologue

—The night before the finale.

Immediately following the moment when the style in which the match finals will be conducted was announced at the grand shrine of «Ragna Ys».

Under the cover of the night, one small flying boat landed in the middle of a forest.

The ship's nationality was cleverly disguised, but it was actually the Alphas Theocracy's high speed smuggling boat, loaded with a militarized spirit.

“...You're finally here.”

There was a small sanctuary built within the forest.

At the front of the door, Lily Flame had been waiting for the boat.

From the entrance of the boat that landed without a sound, a group of priests, wearing jet-black robes alighted.

There were twenty of them. All of them had covered their faces with black cloth, but it could be easily inferred from their quick movements that they were trained combat specialists.

They were members of the Demon King cult's secret agency—«Snake».

“—You sure took your time. I got tired of waiting.”

The one, who turned towards them and voiced out, was—a small girl with dark gray hair.

Muir Alenstarl. Like Lily Flame, she was also an orphan of the «Instructional School».

In contrast to that lovely appearance of hers, she was an elementalist in possession of dreadful and unusual powers.

“It’s because you squandered the militarized spirits without even thinking. By right, «Colossus» and «Garuda» should be used in the finals, and yet—“

While Muir glared sideways, Lily sighed lightly.

In truth, negotiations with the Theocracy involved in the supply of militarized spirits were on the verge of breakdown until yesterday.

Had «Team Inferno» failed to achieve overwhelming victory in the «Tempest» recently, they probably would not be able to receive the support of a new militarized spirit.

—At this moment, an elderly monk stepped forward out from the group of black-robed people, and handed over to Muir a crafted box with delicate ornament added onto it.

“Be pleased. The great Hierarch has bestowed the strongest militarized spirit upon the likes of you.”

“Is it alright if we check the inside?”

“It’s fine.”

The elder nodded to Lily’s affirmation.

“The strongest militarized spirit—Huh? I wonder if this one would be usable?”

Muir casually opened the crafted box.

Stored in the box was—a dimly shining silver bracelet.

From an outsider’s perspective, it looked like some mediocre bracelet. However, the truth was that almost all of the many legend-class magic tools were of modest design without exquisite ornaments.

(The material is highly pure mithril?—)

The words engraved on its surface belonged to the lost language of High Ancient.

Lily squinted her red eyes characteristic of the Elfim race and read out the name carved over there.

“...«Valaraukar»!? Don’t tell me, that demon ruling over flames of ruination—“

A shiver ran down her spine. That was the true name of the devil that destroyed countless number of cities and countries in the far ancient times—the period of the «Spirit War».

(—The Theocracy's «Snake» actually prepared such a spirit.)

It had the highest ranking battle strength for a militarized spirit possessed by the state.

Even Muir, who was usually composed, couldn’t conceal her surprise as expected.

However, like she wasn’t concerned about Lily’s trembling,

“It’s pretty boorish and isn’t something of Onii-sama’s liking.”

Muir put the bracelet onto her slender arm and spoke out her dissatisfaction.

It was the highest ranking tactical-class militarized spirit that could destroy a city singlehandedly.

However, to her, it was only one of her mere tools.

Driving spirits mad and exhausting their very existence, her weird power—«Jester’s Vise».

That was what it meant to the «Monster» born with such a curse-like superpower.

Then.

“—You girls don’t have the right to have an opinion. Assassination puppets of the «Instructional School».”

A ghastly voice could be heard from somewhere.

“«Team Inferno» is no more than the Hierarch’s pawn. Pawns should just play their assigned roles.”

From the darkness of the night, appearing like a mist was—

With blue hair reminiscent of snake scales, it was a girl wearing a lascivious clothing of a foreign nation’s custom.

The moment she showed up, the members of «Snake» prostrated themselves all at once.

“Sjora Kahn! Where have you been—“

Lily swallowed her words of complaint just before finishing her question.

She had already grasped that this witch had kidnapped Fianna Rey Ordesia by her own judgement in the midst of «Tempest».

That was a clear act of disloyalty to «Cardinal», Lily’s master.

However—

(I knew that that girl wasn’t someone that could be trusted from the beginning.)

The Theocracy’s «Snake» was, after all, only related to an alliance formed out of their interest.

It was easy to reproach her of an act of treachery at this place, but it wasn’t a good plan to aggravate the relations with the Theocracy.

(...I’ll definitely make you atone for that.)

Lily stopped glaring at the witch silently, but in the next moment.

“Hey, are you ordering Muir? Despite that you’re a small fry beaten by Onii-sama.”

“Muir!?”

Lily subconsciously gulped in response to those provoking words coming from Muir’s mouth.

Then, the smiling composure disappeared from Sjora Kahn's face.

“...What... was that?”

Her snake-like red eyes, filled with never-ending hatred, turned towards Muir.

“Oh, do you want to do it here? I'm quite alright for it, you know?”

Muir expressed a fearless smile.

“Onee-chan, if you fought with me, you'll die, you know?”

“Ug...”

Sjora's cheeks slightly twitched.

Muir Alenstarl's power as an elementalist was out of the norm. Even though the Theocracy's witch possessed considerable power, purely in terms of genuine battle skills, she could hardly match the graduates of the «Instructional School».

Muir had already put on the bracelet of «Valaraukar». If she released the militarized spirit here, the forest vicinity would vanish in an instant.

“Muir, stop it!”

Lily desperately shouted.

“What, Lily, are you ordering Muir?”

“If you cause an uproar here, you might lose the right to be a participant in the finals.”

“...”

Then, Muir puffed her cheeks sullenly.

“...I can't help it then. I would hate it to be unable to play with Onii-sama at the finals.”

Reluctantly, she put her arms down.

Lily breathed a sigh of relief.

Muir turned around as if she lost interest in Sjora.

“Now that we’ve taken the toy, we have no use for such a boring place. Let’s go, Lily. We’re going to miss the screening of the final of «The Three Cat Knights».

“W-Wait up, Muir...”

Lily hurriedly chased after Muir who ran into the darkness.



While she glared at the darkness the two ran into—

“—Those lowly assassins...”

The Theocracy’s witch Sjora Kahn intensely bit down on her molars.

Originally, «Team Inferno» was nothing more than mercenaries the Theocracy had hired. In spite of that, that girl claiming to be Ren Ashbell was taking action on her own accord.

Even that was annoying but—

(... That girl interfered with my plan.)

Sjora was so filled with rage that she could feel her insides boiling.

The one who released Sjora’s captive, the «Darkness Queen» candidate—Fianna Ray Ordesia, was her without a doubt.

Had she not released the Ordesia princess at the time, Sjora would not have suffered such an unsightly defeat.

“...I’ll definitely not let this pass. That girl, those conceited brats from «Instructional School», the girls in «Team Scarlet», and Kazehaya Kamito—Everyone, everyone, everyone, everyone will be killed by my very hands.”

Her charming red lips quivered in hatred. Her defeat at Pandemoium was etched as an unerasable humiliation into Sjora’s memories.

“Princess—“

The elder of «Snake» opened his mouth as he remained prostrated on the ground.

“What is it?”

“It’s regarding your request, but we are definitely in possession of it.”

“Ah, is that so?”

At that moment, Sjora smiled with satisfaction.

That’s right, that was her goal for appearing here.

“It’s here now, right? Show it to me.”

“Ye—“

The elder nodded, and respectfully held up a small ring taken from the sleeves of his robe.

“Fufu, this is...”

Putting the ring on her right ring finger, the witch smiled in satisfaction.

Sealed in the ring was a spirit that would form a pair with the Demon «Baldanders».

“The one who takes everything by force—«Bandersnatch». With this, I’ll...”

Sjora Kahn was gazing at the ring with a rapturous expression,

“—And, one more thing. There’s a message for you, princess.”

The «Snake» elder continued with a flat tone.

“A message?”

“Yes—from our Hierarch-sama.”

“Our Hierarch-sama!?”

Rosy tones flashed across Sjora's cheeks.

Years had passed since the «Snake»'s Hierarch last bestowed any words upon her.

“R-Really—no, so, what did Hierarch-sama say?”

“Yes—“

The elder shortly nodded at the witch, who was hurriedly pressing on,

“Useless puppet, I shall take over from now onwards—he said.”

“...Eh?”

Without the time to understand the meaning of those words—

All twenty members of «Snake» present unsheathed their blades at the same time.

In an instant, the group of black robes rushed in. Silver flashes occurred in the darkness of the night, and twenty blades pierced the entire body of the witch.

“...Ha... You guys, what—!”

“All is within your plans. Princess, as one who has inherited royal blood, you shall now be the new vessel to incarnate the Hierarch.”

“...Ha, I was deceived... ug...”

“All in accordance with Hierarch-sama's guidance.”

The group that pierced the witch's whole body sung the incantation in spirit language.

From the edges of the blades, violent flashes of lightning gushed out and mowed down the surrounding trees.

That sight seemed to be a ritual to summon an even stronger spirit.

“...Ah... Hierarch-sa...ma...”

The witch gasped as she reached her hand out to the sky—

Her body suddenly made a shaking motion.

Then—

“Ku, ha...haha...kuhahahahaha!”

Tearing up the silent, the loud laughter resounded in the stillness of the night.

“—As expected of the descendant of the royalty, I’ve nothing to criticize about its disposition as a vessel!”

“Hierarch-sama, that body is a temporary vessel. Please do not forget that.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that. It’s a little cramped, but I’ll endure until I obtain a proper body.”

He glanced at the prostrating group with a bored-look,

“The one to have the last laugh will be me.—Hello there, **the other Devil King.**”

The **thing** that had Sjora’s appearance wickedly distorted her lips.

Chapter One

Entrusted Promise

It was late in the night before the final round.

Kamito was sitting in a chair by the sickbed with a grave expression.

The current location was the «Divine Ritual Institute»'s treatment facility. Lying on the sickbed was the person once renowned as the strongest elementalist on the continent, Greyworth Ciel Mais.

"...It's not your fault. Don't look so depressed."

Greyworth spoke softly with a wry smile.

"..."

However, Kamito's expression remained unchanged. After all, the only reason why she collapsed was that she exhausted her own power for the sake of letting Kamito inherit the secret technique of the Absolute Blade Arts.

After that, Kamito instantly brought the unconscious Greyworth to the «Divine Ritual Institute»'s treatment facility.

Thanks to timely treatment, her life was saved but all the pathways in her body for the circulation of divine power had been irreparably severed.

--In other words, she could never command spirits again.

The famous «Dusk Witch» and strongest elementalist was no longer.

"Why..."

Kamito trembled as he clenched his fists hard.

"You knew this would happen, but why..."

"It was going to happen sooner or later. Now it simply moved forward slightly earlier."

Greyworth spoke with self-mockery.

"I did mention in the past that I obtained temporary immortality and sustained youth simply through the Elemental Lords' «Wish». As an elementalist, my original power was already long gone."

Saying that, she extended her arm before Kamito.

The «Spirit Seal» of the demon spirit had completely vanished from the right hand where it originally resided.

"Rather, I should say that it was my good fortune to have a chance to entrust that sword technique to you, lad. Even though it's a double-edged sword, and it's not like you absolutely cannot win without it..."

Greyworth stopped talking at this moment--

Her gray eyes stared sharply into Kamito's face.

"Lad, will you make me a promise right now?"

"Promise?"

"You must defeat that masked elementalist -- the other Ren Ashbell. You are the only one who can stop her."

"..."

Kamito was overwhelmed by her imposing manner which one could not imagine coming from a patient on the verge of death.

"...Yeah, I understand."

Immediately, he agreed vigorously.

...Nothing more needed to be said. That girl was surely an opponent he had to settle things with.

However, why would Greyworth be so insistent on this matter--

"Could it be that you already know? Her goal--"

"No, even though I tried investigating, neither her identity nor her origins have been elucidated at this point."

Greyworth shook her head.

"However, one thing is certain. Backed by the Alphas Theocracy, she has been stockpiling militarized spirits in preparation for the war that will sweep over the entire continent."

"War...?"

Come to think of it -- that Ren Ashbell did say something like that once.

Gathering combat potential for the sake of fighting the kings of this world.

"Lad, regarding the Ranbal War, how much do you know?"

"...The Ranbal War?"

Faced with this sudden question, Kamito frowned.

"I don't really know the details. Just whatever's common knowledge."

"...Hmm, for a lad of your age, that's pretty much to be expected."

The Ranbal War that once swept over the entire continent was the greatest large-scale war between countries in history.

The war initially sparked from disputes between minor countries over spirit crystal mining rights. However, due to the secret machinations of the major powers, the war gradually spread over the entire continent. During the great war, many elementalists were sent to the battlefield, thus tragically cutting short the lives of many young maidens.

--The «Dusk Witch» was the hero of that war.

"...During that war, many of my fellow princess maidens lost their lives. Amongst them were also many who admired me. I have no wish to witness another scene of that sort in the remainder of my life."

As if recalling distant memories, Greyworth murmured.

Her gray eyes, what were they actually seeing right now?

"Kamito."

Suddenly, she gripped Kamito's hand forcefully.

"Your sword is different from mine. Yours is a sword for protecting what's precious. Never ever forget this."

"..."

Uncharacteristically, the «Dusk Witch» displayed seriousness in her eyes, causing Kamito to gulp down a mouthful of air.

Nodding slightly, he gently let go of those freezing cold hands of hers.

"Okay, it's almost time for rest."

Greyworth murmured with exhaustion and lay back on the bed.

"It's also time for you to return to the castle residence. Those highborn ladies must surely be worrying."

"...You don't need me to stay and accompany you?"

"Hmph, who do you take me for?"

Greyworth could not suppress a wry smile.

"Or perhaps, you intend to do something obscene to me in my sleep? Seriously, lad, your strike zone is frighteningly broad."

"W-What are you talking about!? It's not like that at all!"

"Please don't be so loud. I am a hospitalized invalid after all."

"S-Sorry..."

Kamito apologized obediently.

"Hmph, you're still so adorable, lad. Ah yes, by the way--"

As if suddenly remembering something, Greyworth extended towards Kamito an envelope that had been kept on the bedside.

"This is?"

"After returning to the castle residence, please hand this over to those young ladies in your team. As the Director of the Academy, there are words I'd like to tell those adorable students."

"...Got it. I will pass it along to them."

Kamito nodded and took the envelope containing the letter.

◇

Wielding in his hand Est who had returned to sword form, Kamito was just about to leave the clinic.

--Pleased to make your acquaintance, Kazehaya Kamito-kun."

At that moment, he suddenly heard a voice talking to him.

He looked ahead to find a princess maiden dressed in a pure white robe, standing some distance away from the entrance.

Her black hair was tied up behind her back. Her sky blue eyes displayed great intellect as they flashed beneath her glasses.

She counted as a slightly familiar face. Three years ago, Kamito had seen her once at the «Blade Dance».

If he remembered correctly, this girl, two years older than Kamito, was named--

"...Dame Lurie of the «Numbers»?"

"Truly an honor. I didn't expect you to remember my name."

Smiling gently, she brought her hands to her cheeks delightedly.

Lurie Lizaldia.

Ranked eighth amongst the Ordesia Empire's prided «Numbers».

Nicknamed -- Lurie the "Miraculous."

She was the highest ranking «Healer» who specialized in researching healing spells.

Although the «Numbers» were known as knights, it did not imply that all members were spirit knights with exceptional combat skills.

The time when the title corresponded to its literal description and was bestowed only upon knights was in the distant past. Not only did the current «Numbers» include experts in rituals, amongst its ranks were also learned scholars, princess maidens skilled in crafting magical tools, etc.

Amongst them, Lurie was the expert in healing magic.

She probably came here to accompany the Empire's spectating group, in case of accidents involving royalty.

"You came here to treat Greyworth?"

"Yes. The «Divine Ritual Institute» contacted me. Since Greyworth-sama is a hero the Empire takes pride in, I will surely devote my best efforts."

"...I see."

Since she was the highest ranking «Healer» of the current generation, leaving things to her should be fine.

"Greyworth seems like she will be sleeping for a while."

"I understand. Then I'll have her treated a little later."

Lurie smiled faintly.

"So..."

"What is it?"

"About Greyworth, she can no longer use a contracted spirit--"

Kamito halted his question with a grave expression. Lurie also bowed her head slightly.

"Her body was already heavily corroded by the «Cursed Armament Seal» transplanted on her heart."

"...A «Cursed Armament Seal» transplanted on her heart!?"

This was Kamito's first time hearing of that.

Although «Cursed Armament Seal» heart transplants had been performed during the Ranbal War as an initiative spearheaded by the knights, reportedly, there were virtually no successful cases.

Ellis' foster elder sister Velsaria had also undergone the same operation through a «Murders» merchant. In the end, she suffered the tragic fate of having her circulatory system damaged by divine power running amok.

"Without a miracle from the Elemental Lords which granted her immortality, Dame Greyworth's body probably would not have lasted till now. Even after the Ranbal War ended, in order to protect the Empire, she was obliged to continue her supremacy as the strongest elementalist."

And just as she was about to lose that power, the «Dusk Witch» entrusted everything she had to Kamito.

Everything she had protected to this point--

The future of the world.

"..."

As complicated thoughts and feelings swirled in his heart, Kamito stood silently in the same spot.

Seeing that, Lurie once again smiled gently and prepared to leave the clinic.

"Ah, by the way, Kamito-kun--"

However, she suddenly stopped walking and turned around.

"After the current «Blade Dance» ends, you should be receiving a recommendation to join the «Numbers». Of course, it does depend on your performance during the finals, but currently the seventh and eleventh seats are still vacant. Given your ability, you definitely qualify."

"..."

The «Blade Dance» was also a stage for scouting outstanding elementalists.

Although he was still under the radar back in the Academy, having performed magnificently as the ace of «Team Scarlet», Kamito had become the center of attention all of a sudden.

"Sorry, I'm completely uninterested in the «Numbers» title. I've already declined before."

"You've declined before?"

"Uh, no..."

Seeing Lurie incline her head in puzzlement, Kamito frantically shook his head and backtracked.

(...Right. Last time I refused was three years ago, as "her.")

"Never mind. Anyway, I have no intention of joining the «Numbers»."

"I see, how regrettable. However, should you change your mind, please come to the imperial capital. An elementalist like you is always welcomed."

Lurie shrugged lightly and suddenly turned her gaze towards outside the half-open door.

"It's about time for me to go. Your little kitten is getting jealous over there."

"...?"

Puzzled, Kamito followed her gaze and looked--

From the gap in the door, he could see a pair of swaying twintails.



"...What are you doing?"

"Uwaaaa!"

Hearing his voice, the red-haired young beauty frantically jumped out.

Her eyes of ruby were adorned by lovely lashes. Pristine white complexion. Despite the paucity of her chest, the elegant curves of her body was evocative of the image of a graceful female cat.

"I-I didn't come here to peek! I-I just wanted to check out the situation a bit, uh..."

"Hoho, well then, Kamito-kun, see you around."

"...~!"

Bidding the two goodbye, Lurie walked out casually.

As if taking turns in shifts, Claire rushed forward to Kamito's side.

"Kamito, what were you talking with Lurie-sama about?"

Claire asked, slightly displeased.

"Oh yeah, she asked if I was interested in becoming one of the «Numbers»."

"I-I see..."

Probably expecting it, Claire did not seem especially shocked. However.

"T-Then, what did you...?"

She looked up at Kamito with a worried gaze.

"Of course I refused."

Kamito smiled wryly and shook his head.

"Why? The Empire's «Numbers» is a goal that all elementalists admire and strive for."

"I'm not interested in that kind of thing. I only, how should I put it--"

Kamito paused at this point.

(...I really enjoy life at the Academy together with Claire and the girls .)

--Of course, that sentence was far too embarrassing to say out loud.

Hence, Kamito coughed and tried to change the subject.

"P-Putting that aside, what are you doing here?"

"I came to visit the Academy Director... So, is she okay?"

"Yeah, her life is not in danger. But she's currently asleep so don't make too much noise. Oh well, since the healer from the «Numbers» came to treat her, there's nothing to worry about."

"...I see, I'm glad to hear that."

Seeing Claire breathe a sigh of relief, Kamito could not help but feel a sense of guilt.

Regarding Greyworth's loss of the power of the spirit contract, it was probably best not to disclose to the girls for now. With the final round imminent, he could not let them worry too much.

"Okay, let's get back to the castle residence. Tomorrow is the finals."

"Yeah. Right now, everyone is having a strategy meeting."

Resuming a serious expression, Claire nodded.



Having returned to the castle residence, Kamito opened the room door.

"Kamito!" "Kamito-kun!" "Kamito-san!"

Sitting around the table, the other three teammates called out all at the same time.

"Kamito, how is the Director's condition--"

"It's okay. Her life is not in danger."

Ellis had stood up and Kamito gave her the same answer he gave Claire just now.

"I-I see..."

Ellis soothed her chest with her hand in relief.

Amongst the students, Ellis particularly respected Greyworth. In addition to taking on the duties of the Syphid Knights Captain, Ellis even worked in a capacity akin to her secretary. No wonder she was so worried.

"Kamito-san, you must be tired too. I will brew tea immediately."

As soon as Kamito took a seat, Rinslet served herbal tea. The warm and cozy tea fragrance instantly gave one a calming sensation.

After waiting for Kamito to catch a bit of a breather, Claire spoke up.

"So, now that Kamito has returned, let us continue our strategy meeting. Although we are greatly worried about the Director's condition, we must now focus our attention on handling tomorrow's final round."

"Yes, that is correct indeed."

Ellis nodded and answered. Fianna and Rinslet nodded likewise.

While Kamito was absent, they had discussed the rules of the finals. Several hours earlier, the rules had been delivered by a Queen's oracle -- «Cross Fire».

This was similar to the «Tempest» event where teams competed for «Magic Stones» in a vast field, except this time it only lasted three days. Furthermore, the members of each team were going to be randomly transported to different locations.

Once transported into the field, the participants must search for their own teammates. Before converging with their team, it was possible to encounter and battle enemy elementalists.

This set of rules could be described as intermediate between an individual and team battle. How quickly one could converge with their team was the key to victory.

"On first glance, these rules appear to favor teams with «Search» type elementalists, but teams will definitely target that aspect and counter it. Compared to a battle relying on «strongholds» with constructed barriers, this is a totally different game."

"Communications spirit crystals are probably unusable. Carrying them will be pointless."

Kamito agreed with Claire's assessment.

"...Right. Although there are no explicit rules forbidding participants from carrying spirit crystals, it would be better to assume that the field have been set up with a barrier to obstruct communications type magic completely."

"Regarding the field this time, I investigated a little..."

--Fianna took out several ancient books at this time, plopping them on the table.

"These books are?"

"Information about the field for the finals. Milla gathered them."

"Milla did this?"

--Milla Bassett. The representative from the Principality of Rossvale and originally the leader of the «Rupture Division».

Unable to return to her home country because she helped Kamito, Milla had now become a maid for the Laurenfrost family.

This castle residence was clearly quite distant from the «Biblion», but even so, Milla had put forth all her effort into gathering information for Kamito's group.

"Then we really must thank Milla properly afterwards... Well then, what have we learned?"

"Yeah. There are some rather interesting facts."

Fianna nodded.

The location prescribed by the Elemental Lords' oracle was the abandoned city «Megidoa».

Even for Fianna who was from the «Divine Ritual Institute», it was her first time hearing of such a place--

"The abandoned city «Megidoa» was formerly named the «City of Ivory». Far in the ancient past, it was a city constructed by spirits--"

Fianna explained slowly.

"At the same time, during the «Spirit War», it was the final battlefield."

"...Spirit War."

"You've heard of it?"

"At least I've heard the name before. I remember it from Freya-sensei's supplementary lessons... If my memory serves me correctly."

"...Looks like you really know nothing but the name. This is considered basic knowledge in the «Divine Ritual Institute»."

"Anwyay, isn't that a war in fairy tales?"

The «Spirit War» -- a massive war between spirits in the past that had once turned «Astral Zero» into scorched earth.

Vying for domination over this world, the faction of the «Five Great Elemental Lords» fought against the faction of rebel spirits. After persisting for centuries, it was said that the faction of the «Five Great Elemental Lords» were victorious-- ...But in actual fact, the believability of that historical account was rather suspect. Besides, even if a war once took place on «Astral Zero» thousands of years ago, it did not feel real at all.

However.

"No. The «Spirit War» was not simply a war in fairy tales."

Fianna shook her head in objection.

"How so?"

"In recent research, a lot of evidence has been discovered that proves the existence of the «Spirit War». You see, during the Ranbal War, weren't all the ruins and historical sites across the continent thoroughly explored for the sake of excavating sealed spirits and spirit crystals? At the time, many inscriptions were discovered."

"...So it's like that?"

Raised in the «Instructional School», Kamito was not very educated in these matters.

Even though Restia and Greyworth had taught him a certain level of knowledge, Kamito was completely unacquainted with the latest theories and discoveries.

"Why did the spirits rise up against the Elemental Lords?"

"There are several hypotheses circulating but most believe there was an exceptionally powerful existence leading the spirits."

"A powerful existence strong enough to oppose the «Five Great Elemental Lords» eh..."

Hearing that, the first thing that surfaced in Kamito's mind was--

"That particular name" -- the one he only found out recently.

The sixth Elemental Lord who had been purged from all records.

(...Ren Ashdoll.)

Could the mastermind behind the «Spirit War» be the «Darkness Elemental Lord» who seemed to share deep ties with Kamito--?

Just as Kamito was caught in deep thought.

"This is the first time in history for the abandoned city of «Megidoa» to be selected as the field for the «Blade Dance» festival. Surely, there are too many irregularities in proceedings this time."

Claire grumbled with a serious expression.

"Oh well, putting that aside for now, that's basically all the information we have regarding the field. Since it is an ancient battlefield, it is very likely the leylines are chaotic and unable to be used. Ritual magic must be used with care. Also, seeing as unpleasant spirits tend to congregate in ancient ruins, everyone should prepare some spirit crystals to make it easier to activate barriers."

Based on the information at hand, Claire offered sensible advice.

...As expected of the Academy's honors student?

"One more thing. This came from whispers of the wind I heard earlier--"

Ellis spoke up at this point.

By "whispers of the wind," Ellis was referring to intelligence gathered by wind spirits just as the words implied. Wind spirits had vast movement ranges and amongst the five great attributes they were the most suitable for gathering intelligence.

"The representative from the Holy Kingdom of Lugia, Luminaris Saint Leisched of the «Sacred Spirit Knights», has obtained «Divine Armaments» from her home country."

"...«Divine Armaments»?"

Claire asked with great surprise. Kamito also felt intrigued.

Unlike «Elemental Waffen» which took form from contracted spirits, divine armaments were physical weapons at best.

Even if it were a special weapon imbued with the divine attribute, it was still just a weapon.

The «Blade Dance» did not prohibit participants from carrying conventional weapons. In actual fact, Kamito also carried short swords for throwing, though that was a special case.

Considering there was a weight limit for items brought into the match, there were virtually no advantages for an elementalist to prepare

conventional weapons if they were capable of using powerful «Elemental Waffen».

"What would she do with that kind of thing?"

"...Who knows. It would be hard to imagine it being essential for the renowned Paladin."

"Perhaps it's used for some sort of ritual magic? Isn't there a type of spirit magic that requires swords and blades as catalysts to activate?"

Claire, Ellis and Fianna discussed the matter as Rinslet poured new tea in everyone's cups without caring about the matter.

(The Holy Kingdom of Lugia's Paladin...)

Three years ago, the user of the holy sword «Elemental Waffe» who competed against Ren Ashbell for victory. Although she was a knight of foreign country, she was definitely powerful enough to qualify as a candidate for the «Numbers».

Purely due to Restia's darkness attribute being a poor match, Luminaris was the only opponent who posed a difficult challenge in the last competition. Of course, despite such an overwhelming handicap, the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell still defeated her with pure power--

That beautiful knight with her head of pretty blonde hair.

...In the end, Kamito had not even exchanged a single word with her.

An elementalist who had given him trouble in the finals -- to Kamito, that was all she was to him.

However, the girl's forthright gaze left him with some impression.

Compared to Ellis who was likewise a knight, she was different.

Completely steadfast -- *a gaze of purity to a dangerous degree.*

--At this moment.

A deep ringing of a bell sounded in the corridors outside.

The clock had struck midnight.

"...It's time to start."

"Yeah."

It was finally the day of the finals. Claire and the girls all showed nervous expressions.

--The blade dance in the next three days will decide the final victor.

Everyone had clawed their way for victory in the cruel ranking battles for the sake of this day.

"There's not much point in continuing this meeting. Let's retire early and rest in preparation for tomorrow."

"Yeah, that's true." "Right." "Staying up late is not good for the skin."

All the highborn ladies agreed with Claire.

"Well then, see you tomorrow."

Kamito was just about to return to his own room.

"Oh right."

Suddenly he recalled something.

"By the way, I have a letter from Greyworth."

Taking out the sealed envelope from his uniform, Kamito handed it over to Claire.

"The Director sent this to us?"

"Yeah. It's probably for mental preparation before the finals or something like that."

Even though the witch did not seem like the sentimental type, she must have put a lot of thought into her student's important stage.

Like entrusting the final secret technique. Definitely, there was something she wanted to transmit to them.

Claire opened the letter while the other three girls watched from beside.

"..."

They read the letter silently for a while--

" " " "Eeeeeeeeeeh!?" " " "

Suddenly, they all screamed loudly, blushing to their ears.

"...What is it?"

"N-No, n-nothing at all!"

Claire frantically hid the letter behind her.

"Uwaaaaah, w-what should we do..."

"Th-This kind of task is completely impossible!"

"But, if we don't do it then Kamito-kun will--"

"Th-That's right, since the Director has said so..."

The group of girls chattered away quietly in discussion.

"...?"

Chapter Two

Blade Dance of the Night

(...That letter, what did it actually contain?)

Driven out of the room by the young ladies and having returned to his room, Kamito leaned Est against the wall and laid himself down on the bed, still wearing his uniform.

(...Oh well, whatever. Speaking of which, today sure was tiring.)

As soon as he lay on the soft bed, he suddenly became aware of all the fatigue in his body.

...This was hardly surprising, given all that had happened throughout this entire day.

A date with Leonora Lancaster the ace of the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor, as well as the battle against Ellis and the rest in the «Water Elemental Festival» in the lake.

In the «True Sanctuary» he had listened to the Queens' oracle regarding the finals, then -- Greyworth had entrusted him with the final secret technique.

The strongest countering sword skill, one that could even defeat the anti-spirit destructive sword technique of the «Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance».

Absolute Blade Arts, Final Form -- «Last Strike».

"..."

Reaching out with his right hand into the darkness, Kamito bent his fingers one after another in the air.

At the time, his entire body had suffered the impact. The numbness in his arms still had not dissipated completely.

As if reluctant to lose grasp of the secret technique's true nature, Kamito clenched his fist tightly.

(--This is no ordinary sword technique for combat but one meant to be applied in the ritual kagura of princess maidens.)

While defending against the enemy's attacks and using ritual kagura to interfere in divine power, sword strikes were converted into a dance performance that absorbed the enemy's divine power. Furthermore, once the divine power expands to an explosive level, it is released all at once to unleash a one hit kill attack--

...In theory, it was basically something like that.

Of course, it was impossible to learn a sword technique by relying on theory alone.

Even though Kamito was born with exceptional talent in analyzing combat techniques, trying to master an understanding of ritual kagura movements overnight was too much of a stretch.

Greyworth had also mentioned that the sword technique was a double-edged sword. Depending on the situation, it would be best to avoid using it as much as possible--

"...However, perhaps there really is no other choice. In order to defeat that girl."

«Team Inferno»'s leader.

The masked elementalist who called herself «Ren Ashbell», just like Kamito three years ago.

Kamito had faced her in direct combat only once, that time in the forest when he rescued Claire and the rest. In just a few rounds of clashing, she had clearly displayed overwhelming strength.

Furthermore, she had not even released her «Elemental Waffe» back then.

Why would such a powerful elementalist be completely unknown until now?

Also, her goal seemed to be just as Greyworth predicted, to bring the chaos of war back to this continent--

(...Anyway, pondering it now would be useless.)

Kamito sighed and put down his outstretched right arm.

(Having arrived at this point, all that's left is a dialogue through swords.)

Right now, it was imperative to recover from the fatigue accumulated from learning the secret technique, as well as restore his severely depleted divine power.

Feeling all the muscles in his body tense up, Kamito slowly closed his eyes.

--Just at this moment.

"Hey Kamito, are you still awake?"

"...Claire?"

Kamito frantically jumped up from bed--

Only to see Claire standing before the door.

"What's the matter?"

"Ah, hmm, uh..."

...Probably about the final round, or did she have something else to confirm?

His mind filled with questions, Kamito lit the spirit crystal by his bed.

"...!?"

Instantly, he could not help but hold his breath.

Standing in front of the door, Claire had changed into a flimsy nightgown of lace.

Perhaps because she had just come out from a bath, her red twintails seemed to be steaming subtly with moisture.

"S-Say, uh..."

She shyly twiddled her fingers. This particularly charming act caused Kamito to hastily shift his gaze away.

"You can't sleep?"

After all, the finals began tomorrow. Being nervous was only natural.

"Hmm, yeah..."

"I see."

Kamito nodded.

"Then I'll accompany you for a while. After all, I can't fall asleep yet either."

"Th-Thank you..."

Claire stiffly nodded and entered the room.

"May I sit here?"

"Sure."

Claire cautiously took a seat on the bedside.

From her moist hair, Kamito could smell the fragrance of shampoo.

"..."

"..."

In this manner, the silence persisted for several seconds.

(Th-This is too embarrassing...!)

Kamito gulped.

He was currently alone in the same room with a beauty in a nightgown.

...No wait, although they shared a room back in the Academy residence, there was never a time when they sat on the same bed like this.



Claire continued to keep her gaze cast elsewhere as she fiddled with her fingers.

(Man, she's so cute...)

...As much as Kamito was reluctant, he could not deny this fact.

Just as Kamito found himself gazing mesmerized at Claire's facial profile with her moist hair--

"Hey, d-do you have anything amusing to talk about?"

Finally, Claire spoke up.

"Something amusing?"

"Hmm, yeah, normally I would read a book I like before going to sleep, but because Rinslet spoiled the ending for me, I have nothing to read now."

"...Ah, speaking of which, you two were quarreling this morning because of that."

This morning, Kamito was dragged out by Mireille to act as the arbitrator for their dispute.

However, thanks to that, he was treated to Rinslet's breakfast and got to hear about their childhood stories.

"Sorry, I don't have anything amusing to talk about."

Kamito shrugged and shook his head.

Somehow, he felt like this had been happening a lot lately.

...If memory served him correctly, this also happened when the two of them had gone to negotiate with the «Rupture Division».

"So, what's the continuation of the incident last time?"

"Incident?"

As Kamito frowned, Claire turned around to face Kamito.

"That one, didn't you tell me about it at the theater? How you met the Academy Director four years ago, Kamito. Just tell me the continuation of that story. You promised then that you'd tell me later."

"..."

Kamito was at a loss for words for a moment.

...He did remember he had made such a promise indeed.

(...What a terrible situation.)

Continuing from that incident, there was no way he could avoid mentioning the «Blade Dance» three years ago -- the time period when Kamito was still the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell.

As much as possible, he did not want to mention things related to that--

(...However, it's no wonder that she would be intrigued.)

Kamito cast his gaze towards his leather gloved left hand.

What Claire wanted to hear were most likely things related to Restia. It was already impossible to assert that the darkness spirit who had been pulling strings in the shadows behind the «Blade Dance» stage was none of Claire and the girls' business.

"...If you don't want to talk about the past, I won't force you. I'm sure you've gone through a lot, Kamito. But please, at least tell me a little."

Claire paused for a moment and continued:

--What is that darkness spirit's goal?"

"..."

Stared at directly by those eyes of ruby--

"...It seems like it's something about making me awaken."

Kamito answered vaguely and ambiguously.

He did not choose to be so ambiguous for the sake of deceit or anything like that.

...To be frank, even Kamito was not sure what Restia's purpose was concretely.

However, it was absolutely certain that she wanted to use the current «Blade Dance» to let «something» dormant in Kamito's body awaken.

Furthermore, that goal seemed very likely to coincide with Ren Ashbell's.

Also--

'--I hope you can assassinate them. The five Elemental Lords.'

The statement that lingered in Kamito's hazy memories.

The «Wish» Restia entrusted to Kamito three years ago.

How were Restia's current actions related to that «Wish» --

"Awaken? You mean that «Darkness Elemental Lord» or whatever?"

Claire asked with a serious expression.

"Then I have no idea..."

Kamito shook his head and continued:

"However, there is one thing I am absolutely certain. The place I grew up in, the «Instructional School» is the hell existing in this world. In that hell, she was the one who bestowed upon me a human heart. No matter what her current intentions are, I will absolutely take her back. It is for this very reason that I entered this current «Blade Dance»."

Kamito tightly clenched his left fist that was clad in a leather glove.

"Is that so..."

Claire showed a lonely expression.

"She's always occupied Kamito's heart, I see."

"...Hmm?"

"...N-Nothing."

Blushing, she turned her gaze away as if sulking.

--Just at this moment.

A rumbling of running footsteps could be heard from outside.

"...?"

Kamito frowned and in the next instant--

"Claire, stealing a march on us is really too sly of you."

Flinging the door open, Fianna appeared, dressed in a nightgown.

Faced with the situation, Claire frantically got up from the bed and stood up.

"W-What, w-what do you mean by stealing a march!? I-I had no intention of anything like that..."

"W-What were you two doing!?"

"C-Clearly we all promised to do it together!"

After Fianna, Rinslet and Ellis made their appearance, also in their nightgowns.

Rinslet was hugging a pillow while Ellis held a teddy bear in embrace.

"...W-What happened, why has everyone gathered here?"

Kamito voiced his puzzlement.

"...Sigh, it can't be helped."

Hearing Kamito's question, Claire slumped her shoulders as if surrendering and faced Kamito once more.

"U-Umm, Kamito..."

Still continuing to blush, she coughed once.

"Hmm?"

"T-Tonight, you will be sleeping together with all of us!"

"...Huh?"

This time it was Kamito's turn to be completely dumbfounded.



(H-How did it come to this!?)

...Several minutes later.

Lying on the bed in his pajamas, Kamito had already repeated this question to himself an uncountable number of times.

The bed in the room was quite large but even so, squeezing all four young beauties on it meant that they could not avoid being in close contact with one another.

"Ah, mmm... H-Hey, everyone is leaning too close to Kamito!"

"Th-This is something that cannot be helped, otherwise we would fall off the bed."

"...W-Wow, a male's body feels so solid."

"Fufu, Kamito-kun, it's perfectly fine for you to use my bosom as your pillow, okay?"

Boing. Boing.

"...!?"

The beauties' breathing brushed past the back of his ear. Their whispers continued nonstop.

As if about to be suffocated by maidenly body scent, Kamito felt his sanity on the brink of collapse.

"Fuah, Kamito, you are not allowed to move... J-Just leave everything to us."

"That's right, Kamito-kun, all you need to do is sleep right there... Yes, smooch♪"

While Claire caressed Kamito's chest with her slender fingers, Fianna used her lips to kiss Kamito on the neck.

"H-How could I possibly sleep in a situation like this...!?"

Kamito tensed his entire body and yelled out.

According to Claire, this was apparently a type of ritual magic for recovering Kamito's energy.

Something about being in contact with the bodies of princess maidens would stimulate the circulation of divine power.

...The root cause of this situation stemmed from Greyworth's letter.

Apparently the letter said that Kamito had exhausted a great amount of divine power in order to learn the secret technique, hence there might be adverse effects on the final round the next day, etc.

Furthermore, the letter also gave step by step instructions on the ritual magic required to recover the depleted divine power.

(...Damn it, what did that witch do this time!?)

The image of Greyworth's malicious smile surfaced in his mind.

"K-Kamito, if we do not press our bodies closer together, the effect produced will not be enough, okay..."

"...E-Ellis!?"

Ellis' soft bosom was pressing hard against both his arms, accommodating in shape with great elasticity.

Only a thin layer consisting of a lacy nightgown and underwear separated them from intimate contact between each other's bare skin.

Vaguely visible beneath her nightgown was the black underwear she only wore on occasions of "decisive battles."

"A-A serious captain of the knights can't be doing something like this!"

"...N-No it is not like that, hyah..."

The usually stern maiden knight was looking at Kamito with passionate eyes.

Kamito could not stop his heart rate from accelerating.

Her armor removed, her ponytail untied, the impression she gave off was completely different from usual.

Watching her blushing cheeks and her dark-brown eyes which seemed to be filled with unease--

Kamito felt a surging impulse to embrace her tightly in his arms.

(...W-What the heck am I thinking!?)

Kamito frantically shook his head as if trying to drive out evil thoughts.

...But since the bed was packed full with girls, in actual fact all his body could do was move slightly.

"...Kamito-san, I-I shall offer my divine power to you too."

"Rinslet...!?"

A seductive sound of clothing friction could be heard.

This time, it was Rinslet who was crawling over Kamito's body and drawing her face near.

Her lips were as lovely as rosebuds while her adorable eyes were like emeralds.

Slightly curling at the tips, her blonde hair was lightly brushing against Kamito's face.

"J-Just this once, I am Kamito-san's body pillow..."

"Ah, uh..."

...Kamito could feel his cheeks getting hot and his heart beating faster and faster.

These highborn ladies from prestigious noble families normally displayed such intense pride.

But now they were pressing themselves tightly against Kamito in a manner completely contrary to that.

Boing boing.

(...G-Girls really have such supple bodies.)

...Even though things had already progressed to this point, Kamito could not help but be confronted with this feeling of reality.

"S-So, Kamito-san..."

Rinslet whispered shly by his ear.

"W-What is it?"

"Umm, I can feel your breath when you exhale, Kamito-san... Ah... Yah..."

As if feeling ticklish, the highborn lady twisted her body and gave off a cute scream.

"S-Sorry, but it can't really be helped in a situation like this... Woah!"

Kamito frantically turned his face away, only to instantly bury himself into something soft.

...Full of elasticity, the sensation was comfortable beyond belief.

"Fufu, Kamito-kun, this is your favorite royal breast sandwich♪"

"I-If you're an imperial princess, then please don't say something so tasteless!"

Kamito yelled with his face all red.

Due to the activation of ritual magic, the «Spirit Seal» on Fianna's chest was glowing faintly blue-white.

"Jeez Kamito, you're such an idiot..."

Ouch.

"...!?"

This time, Kamito felt a sudden bite on his arm.

"C-Claire...!"

"...Mmm... Ahmmm... D-Don't forget, you are something that belongs, smooch... to me."

The tip of Claire's cute tongue was licking Kamito's skin like a kitten lapping up milk.

Kamito felt his entire body shudder from this sensation he had never experienced before.

"Hmm, Kamito's sweat, it's a little salty..."

Claire swept up her hair from her neck and licked Kamito's arm in earnest.

Her red eyes seemed to have lost focus as if her mind was in a daze from a fever.

"Oooh, smooch... D-Don't get the wrong idea, this is just a ritual for recovering your divine power..."

"Th-That is correct, Kamito! Tonight, please entrust your body to us--"

"We'll gradually eliminate your fatigue!"

The young ladies on the bed timidly reached out with their fingers.

"...Umm, that's kind of completely impossible."

...In a situation like this, Kamito could not possibly fall asleep gradually.

"Fufu, looks like it can't be helped."

Fianna smiled and drew a small magic circle in the air with her finger.

"Fianna?"

"Nimbly dancing spirits, please bestow restful slumber upon the warrior -
- «Sleeping Cloud»."

Instantly, a purple mist covered the entire room--

Thus Kamito's consciousness sank into darkness.



...The next morning.

Boing. Boing.

"Ooh, mmm..."

Surrounded by a rather comfortable sensation, Kamito woke up.

"...Was it just a dream?"

Half-awake, Kamito muttered to himself. However--

"Uwah, Kamito, where do you think you are touching..."

"K-Kamito-san is such a pervert..."

"...!?"

The whispers by his ear prompted him to suddenly sit up on the bed.

"...A dream, yeah right!"

The memories from last night before Fianna's sleep hypnosis remained vividly in his mind.

Sleeping in the same bed as Kamito were the highborn ladies in their nightgowns sleeping soundly with adorable breathing noises. Seeing Claire's thigh exposed from under the hem of her nightgown, Kamito blushed and frantically turned his gaze away.

"Kamito, I-I can't believe you forced me to do something so shameless, you are truly, yaaa..."

"Fufu, doing this with everyone, Kamito-kun is truly the Demon King of the Night..."

"...W-What the heck are you girls dreaming!?"

Kamito remarked in exasperation as he listened to the girls talking in their dreams.

"...I'd better go take a shower and purify myself as well."

...In any case, this sort of situation was really terrible for his mental health.

In order not to wake Claire and the girls, Kamito quietly got out of bed.

Leaving the bedroom, he opened the curtain to the entrance of the «Purification Chamber».

"...Meow?"

"Woah...Ah."

Only to find a fiery burning object crouching on the floor by his feet.

Claire's contracted spirit, «Scarlet».

Normally, Claire would hug Scarlet in her sleep like a hot water bottle, but because she was squeezed in with everyone else on Kamito's bed last night, Scarlet had no choice but to sleep out here.

"...I almost stepped on its tail."

Kamito sighed with relief.

"Meow meow."

The hell cat spirit stood up and started walking in circles around Kamito.

Normally, contracted spirits did not open their hearts to anyone apart from their contractor. But who knew if it was because Kamito fed Scarlet all the time or not, Scarlet displayed unexpected intimacy with Kamito.

"You want to bathe together too?"

Kamito asked half jokingly but Scarlet shook its head vigorously.

"...Oh well, you're a flame spirit after all. Being afraid of water is only normal."

After rubbing the hell cat's head, Kamito took off his pajamas and entered the showering space.

Using his hand to touch the tiny spirit crystal that was inlaid in the metal stand, he infused a little divine power. Very soon, water began to flow forcefully out of the hole in the ceiling.

The icy cold water droplets helped him to gradually cool down the elevated temperature of his body.

As Kamito took his wet hand, intending to scrub his body, he discovered that the teeth marks left behind by Claire's bite were still visible.

Recalling again what happened the previous night, Kamito blushed.

"...That Greyworth, I really shouldn't have worried about her."

Even after losing the power of the spirit contract, the witch was still a witch. From the very start, watching Kamito squirm in awkward situations had always been her greatest entertainment.

"...But anyway, the effects of the ritual magic seem to be real."

Slightly clenching his fist to summon strength, the faint phosphorescent glow of divine power appeared all over his body.

All his fatigue from the previous day had been dispelled. Kamito's body was back in peak condition.

In this state, even using Est at full power would not exhaust him so quickly.

At this time.

"Kamito, time to scrub your back."

"Yeah, thank you."

After answering politely--

"...Hmm?"

Kamito tilted his head in puzzlement.

"...Say, woah!?"

Turning around, he found an incomparably beautiful fairy.

Long silver-white hair shining with dazzling brilliance. Pristine snow-like skin as white as fresh milk.

Those mysterious violet eyes of hers were staring expressionlessly at Kamito.

The sword spirit -- Terminus Est.

Renowned as the legendary «Demon Slayer», Kamito's contracted spirit.

"E-Est! W-Why are you here!?"

Blushing, Kamito frantically turned his gaze away and screamed.

Est's current appearance was naturally her usual naked kneesocks look.

...Oh well, although there was nothing strange about being naked in the shower, she apparently still adhered adamantly to her philosophy of never taking kneesocks off, even in a place like this.

Expanding due to the moisture, the black kneesocks seemed even more seductive for some strange reason.

"Kamito, if you don't sit down I cannot scrub your back."

"I-It's okay, don't worry! I can handle it myself!"

Hearing that--

"..."

Est glared expressionlessly at Kamito.

"Kamito, I was unable to get into bed this morning."

"Eh?"

"I was unable to get into bed this morning."

She repeated herself.

"..."

Come to think of it, Est always crept secretly into Kamito's bed every morning.

Presumably because the highborn ladies had occupied the entire bed, she was unable to sneak inside this morning.

"...Are you actually angry about that?"

"No, I am not angry. Master."

"No no no, you are definitely angry!"

Despite the fact that it was difficult to read Est's thoughts and feelings from her expressionless face, whenever she addressed Kamito so distantly, there was no doubt that she was angry.

"...I-I am in the wrong! Next time you crawl into bed, I'm not going to be angry again."

"Really?"

"Yes, let's make this a promise."

"Uwah, Kamito..."

Kamito placed his hand on Est's head and gently caressed her beautiful silver hair.

...Looks like her mood had lifted.

However, Kamito could only relax for a moment.

"So Kamito, please turn your back to me."

"Like I said, how did it come to this!?"

"Kamito, I was unable to get into bed this morning."

"...I-I get it. Sorry."

Giving up on resisting, Kamito sat down with his back facing Est.

Est pressed her tiny palms tightly against Kamito's back.

(...C-Clear my mind of unnecessary thoughts.)

Indeed, this was definitely nothing worth feeling guilty about.

(Just a contracted spirit helping me scrub my back, that's all.)

The floating soap bubbles gradually expanded.

Then--

Splash.

"...!?"

An unknown sensation coming from his back made Kamito greatly alarmed.

"Kamito, what's the matter?"

"E-Est... Say, y-you're touching my back."

"...? Of course, because I am washing your back, Kamito."

A bouncy sensation.

"N-No, that's not what I mean, your chest..."

"...?"

Est inclined her head in puzzlement and pressed her sud-covered body even closer.

...This situation was terrible. Extremely terrible indeed.

Although Est had no intentions of that sort--

The small yet extremely elastic sensation on Kamito's back was very dangerous in various ways.

"P-Please, just scrub normally with your hands--"

Just as Kamito was midway through his sentence.

--Kamito, please listen to me."

Pressing her body tightly against him, Est whispered in Kamito's ear.

Her petite lower jaw was resting against Kamito's shoulder.

The wet silver hair draped and clung to his burning hot skin.

"...Est?"

"Kamito, you have accepted my fate as the cursed demon sword. Hence, as your sword, Kamito, I shall accept the entirety of your being, Kamito."

"..."

"Even if you are the reincarnation of the «Demon King», Kamito, my feelings will not change. I am your sword, Kamito, and your wish is my command -- Promise me, you must be absolutely victorious."

These were the thoughts and feelings invested in this blade dance by the normally cool and collected sword spirit, now voiced out loud.

In order to respond to Est's feelings, Kamito replied:

--Yeah. I'll be relying on you, partner."

Kamito turned towards his shoulder to face Est and nodded vigorously.

--Then in the next instant.

"Meow--Meow--!"

"...?"

Just as what seemed to be Scarlet's call was heard coming from outside, the door to the shower space was forcefully flung open.

"Uwaaaah, y-y-you, what are you making poor Est do!?"

Claire appeared, shouting with her face all red.

"Kamito!" "Kamito-kun!" "Kamito-san!"

Following closely behind were Ellis, Fianna and Rinslet, equally astounded by the sight.

"N-No! This is because--"

Kamito tried his hardest to explain, however--

A situation where he was accompanied by a beautiful girl spirit dressed in nothing but kneesocks, all covered in soap suds...

...He could not find any reasonable explanation at this time.

"...~Y-You sexual deviant!"

"Shameless, completely shameless!"

"Sigh, Kamito-kun surely is the Demon King of the Daytime."

"Y-You damned atrocity, I will make you into a ham cutlet sandwich!"

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble.....!

"H-Huff, huff..."

Faced with the burning rage of the young ladies, Kamito's face twitched convulsively.



Having had breakfast at the castle residence, Kamito and his group gathered in the lobby.

Next, the group was going to meet the princess maidens sent by the «Divine Ritual Institute» to lead the way on foot to a transport «Gate» a certain distance away.

Kamito was carrying the entire team's luggage by himself.

Although the weight of luggage allowed into the field was limited and therefore no one could bring too much, the sum total of five people's luggage was quite a burden.

Especially Fianna who used ritual magic, her bag was stuffed to a bulging degree.

"...Say, what's inside this?"

"Candle holders, large mirrors, stand made from unvarnished wood... As well as all sorts of ritual outfits."

"...I see, so that's why it's so heavy."

Kamito shrugged helplessly.

"This is your deserved punishment. Carry the luggage properly."

"Just treat this level of exertion as training for your back and legs."

"It's all because you're too much of a pervert, Kamito-san!"

The young ladies seemed to be still angry about the morning incident.

...Oh well, simply punished to carry the luggage was already quite fortunate.

As a side note, Est had returned to sword form and was hanging at Kamito's waist.

The exposed blade reflected light streaming in through the window, glittering with dazzling brilliance.

The lobby was not only occupied by the members of «Team Scarlet». The various members of the Laurenfrost family were also present to see them off.

"Onee-sama, you must save Judia-oneesama."

"Don't worry. We will surely obtain victory in this blade dance and fulfill the «Wish»."

Rinslet gently caressed her younger sister Mireille's head.

Her «Wish» was to rescue her other younger sister, Judia Laurenfrost, who had been eternally sealed in cursed ice by the angered Water Elemental Lord.

Naturally, not only Rinslet but also everyone in the team, all of them shouldered their own respective reasons that compelled them to win in this battle.

"Onii-sama, please remember to protect Onee-sama."

Mireille smiled lightly towards Kamito again.

"Ah yes... Wait a minute, I'm not your brother."

"Th-That's right! Without Father's permission, that kind of thing..."

"But my lady, when I reported to Earl Laurenfrost the day before yesterday, he frequently praised Kamito-sama."

"Carol, y-you, w-what are you talking about~!?"

"Fufufu..."

Thud thud thud.

Blushing intensely, Rinslet hammered her fists against the incompetent maid's back.

...The final battle was clearly imminent, but the current scene felt no different from usual.

(...Oh well, this is more like the way we are.)

Kamito smiled wryly inside.

--Kamito."

He suddenly found someone tugging his uniform from behind.

"...?"

Turning around, he found a young girl in an adorable maid uniform standing there.

Slightly wavy dark-brown hair.

Eyes of heterochromia.

She was the former «Rupture Division» leader and currently the personal maid attending to Mireille, Milla Bassett.

"Milla, thank you very much for the information you gave us yesterday."

In response to Kamito's thanks, she said:

"I am simply doing my part naturally as the ally of «Team Scarlet»."

Milla quietly shook her head.

"Kamito..."

"Hmm?"

"...Please, return safe and sound."

"Yeah, don't worry. We will surely return victorious."

"Mmm~, seriously, Milla, is that all you're going to say?"

"W-What are you talking about...!?"

As Mireille teased Milla jokingly, Milla instantly blushed shyly.

"The princess maidens responsible for leading the way have arrived. Time to go."

"Understood."

Bidding Milla and the rest goodbye in front of the castle residence, «Team Scarlet» set off.



Following the guidance of the princess maidens leading the way, the group walked in the forest.

Because special transport magic was being used this time, the transmission location was not at the «True Sanctuary» but in four temples in the forest.

--Everyone listen carefully, let's make a final confirmation."

Claire walked as she raised her index finger.

"After being transported to the field, we must prioritize converging with teammates. Before our team is gathered, try to avoid unnecessary battles as much as possible. This applies even if the enemy is alone."

Their main strategy had already been discussed in the meeting last night.

Other than Kamito, all other teammates must avoid one on one combat as much as possible. They were to battle as a team from start to end.

Even though Claire and the girls were excellent elementalists, they still faced substantial difficulties in going head to head against the ace-level elementalists participating in the current «Blade Dance».

Let alone Ren Ashbell, as soon as any of them faced the «Instructional School»'s Muir the «Monster», Dragon Knight Leonora or Paladin Luminaris, chances of victory were very slim.

«Team Scarlet»'s strength lay in their teamwork. Although their cooperation was quite lacking when the team was initially formed, they now meshed with one another's traits like gears, allowing them to perform several times better than their original strength.

Naturally, they performed best when all five members were gathered in formation, but even when fighting as pairs in tactical units, they could probably muster enough power to oppose the individual aces of various teams.

Hence, they must gather in groups of at least two before engaging any enemy teams.

However, Kamito was the exception with his ability to defeat ace-level enemies singlehandedly. Instead, he should proactively seek out battle in order to weaken the other teams.

(...That said, none of these enemies would be easy to defeat, given they were elite enough to advance to the finals.)

In terms of pure power, Muir with her special ability of the «Jester's Vise» definitely held the advantage. Also, the power displayed by that other Ren Ashbell was only the tip of an iceberg.

Ultimately, it was best to avoid unnecessary combat and meet up with the team as quickly as possible.

They walked for dozens of minutes as they discussed.

"--The destination is here."

The princess maidens leading the way stopped before a small shrine in the forest.

The doors were opened to reveal five faintly glowing magic circles drawn on the stone floor.

"Are these the «Gates» responsible for transporting us?"

Kamito laid down the luggage he was carrying in his arms against his chest.

"Kamito, thank you for your labors."

"Everyone, let's carry the minimum with us. For now, we'll have my Fenrir keep the things that are only needed after we meet up."

Snapping her fingers, Rinslet summoned the white wolf with a flurry of wind and snow.

The white wolf widened its jaws and instantly sucked in the luggage.

"I'll carry the equipment for ritual magic myself -- Georgios!"

This time it was Fianna who summoned her knight spirit.

The tall armored knight opened up parts of his armor and took in her bag into the empty space.

"Doesn't this mean there was no point in making me carry the luggage?"

Kamito grumbled as he stepped on one of the glowing «Gates».

"These are your respective «Magic Stones»."

The leading princess maidens handed over to everyone the spirit crystals containing spirit magic for making the spatial «Leap».

This was identical to the ones used in the previous survival battle -- the «Tempest».

Since the field was surrounded by an isolation barrier established by the «Elemental Lords», there was no way to leave through ordinary means.

Once transported inside, an elementalist could only exit the field if their «Magic Stone» was taken or damaged -- in other words, a defeat in the blade dance.

--May the princess maidens bestow the blessing of the «Elemental Lords» upon these proud elementalists!"

With the solemn declaration of the princess maidens, everyone's «Gate» was activated.

"Kamito..."

"Hmm?"

Suddenly, Claire called out to Kamito.

"...Very soon, we'll see each other again, right?"

"Why, are you feeling lonely?"

"...~I-Idiot, h-how could that be possible!?"

With a blushing face, Claire turned her gaze away.

Kamito smiled wryly--

--Don't worry. Very soon, we will find each and every one of us."

Instantly, Kamito's entire body turned into particles of light and disappeared.

◇

Meanwhile, in another temple in the forest--

"Ladies, starting from this moment, we will perform the final mission issued by «Des Esseintes»."

The blonde maiden knight took off her white overcoat and tossed it aside.

Worn beneath the overcoat was a uniform with white lines against a red background, similar to the «Rupture Division»'s uniform in design except with the colors reversed.

Her eyes of sapphire were infused with intense brightness. Her braided long blonde hair shining with dazzling brilliance.

She was the Paladin -- Luminaris Saint Leisched.

The leader of the «Sacred Spirit Knights» representing the Holy Kingdom of Lugia.

The young female knights, all with hair cut uniformly to shoulder length, stood motionless in a row before her.

Although one of the teams Kamito encountered in the «Tempest» also shared the name of the «Sacred Spirit Knights», the team right here was trained to a completely different level.

Amongst the three sent by the Holy Kingdom of Lugia, the two defeated teams were merely vanguards.

The team present right here was their true number one squad.

--Within the Kingdom, the most elite team renowned as «Stahl Loewe».

Their power rivaled the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor» from Dracunia, the Dragon Empire. In terms of team strategies, they were well-matched against the Quina Empire's «Four Gods».

"Well then, to assist the completion of the mission, I have something to give you all."

Luminaris drew a magic circle using the sword in her hand.

Immediately, five blindingly bright beams of light were produced as long rod-like objects appeared from them.

A nervous atmosphere began to spread amongst the young female knights.

The shining tips of sharp lances -- These were five lances with holy scripture engraved on their shaft.

Specially crafted divine armaments -- the «Longinus Copies».

Forged by top craftsmen of magical equipment, these were replicas of a legendary class «Magical Equipment».

Due to being physical weapons forged from mithril, they were harder to use compared to «Elemental Waffen». But for experienced elementalists, as soon as divine power was infused into them, they became effective weapons.

They were particularly powerful against spirits carrying the darkness attribute.

More importantly, these weapons carried a special effect -- all it took was the infusion of simple «Search» magic and they could automatically seek out the direction of darkness spirits.

The Holy Kingdom of Lugia's number one squad had received two missions from their country's «Des Esseintes».

Superficially, their mission was complete victory at the «Blade Dance».

But their true secret mission was -- "The extermination of «Darkness Spirit» Restia."

As for why the darkness spirit's extermination was necessary -- the reason was completely undisclosed.

However, to the knights of the Holy Kingdom of Lugia, the orders of «Des Esseintes» were absolute. Hence, they did not question missions in any way, instead they simply carried them out silently.

During the «Tempest» event, Restia was accompanied by the powerful monster «Nepenthes Lore» which prevented them from taking action. But this time, the rules were intermediate between an individual and team battle. So long as they seize an opportunity when the darkness spirit acted alone, there were ample chances of success.

(In addition--)

Luminaris muttered to herself internally.

(...That «Darkness Spirit» was *her* sword.)

Three years ago, Luminaris had lost to that opponent despite the overwhelmingly favorable conditions.

Restia was the elemental waffe of the «Strongest Blade Dancer» -- the «Vorpal Sword».

(--Facing the same opponent, I will not allow myself a second defeat.)

Luminaris looked up and sternly announced.

"Confirming our tactics once again. Our first priority is the extermination of the «Darkness Spirit». As for the commander of «Team Inferno», Ren Ashbell, do not engage her in combat unless three or more teammates are gathered. Over!"

"Affirmative!"

The young female knights nodded simultaneously and gripped their respective «Holy Lance».

Chapter Three

Sparks Scattered Across the Battlefield

Opening his eyes, Kamito found a dim gray sky displayed before him.

"...Is this place the stage for the final round?"

Experiencing the dizziness unique to the aftereffects of «Leap», Kamito surveyed his surroundings.

Entering his view were the scattered ruins of an astoundingly vast city.

Monolithic structures resembling shrines stood tall everywhere, or rather, collapsed rubble and debris formed mountains. Strange trees were growing out of the ground, displacing stone tiles, creating a scene like a sea of trees.

"As the stage for offering kagura to the «Elemental Lords», this is really a creepy place."

The abandoned city, «Megidoa» -- a historic battlefield of the «Spirit War» thousands of years ago.

Howling winds blew sand and dirt across his cheeks.

Compared to the sanctuary «Ragna Ys», the air was completely different.

The presence of destruction -- a substance that could be described in such a way, clung stubbornly to one's skin.

Here was a place completely devoid of life's presence.

Even the presence of spirits, which should normally be widespread throughout the world, was also--

"...In any case, it looks like there aren't any enemy teams I'll run into straight away."

Kamito started walking as he paid close attention to his surroundings.

These massive structures gave off an intimidating presence simply by existing.

Although this was in «Astral Zero», a realm where time was half-stopped, the sight of these millennia-old structures still standing intact was quite astounding.

--Suddenly, Kamito noticed something as he approached the walls surrounding the abandoned city.

(...Perhaps, these building materials are not simply stone?)

One would like to call them stone, but their surfaces were as smooth as mirrors.

...It was hard to imagine that an object that had withstood erosion from wind and rain over millennia could remain in this condition.

Just as he reached out with his hand to pat dust off the surface, sparks scattered where his fingers made contact.

The divine power released from his fingertips had reacted with the stone material.

(...This, it can't be!)

Kamito widened his eyes.

If one were to ask what kind of substance could react to an elementalist's divine power, only one answer came to mind.

(These ruins were originally built from unrefined «Spirit Crystals»!?)

Truly incredible -- but based on what he witnessed, it was the only conclusion.

This abandoned city could have been a massive mine for spirit crystals.

Only because the purity of the crystals were low, they could not be used even after processing.

Standing there in amazement for a while--

(...By the way, now is not the time to be doing something like this. I must find Claire and the others as quickly as possible.)

Coming back to his senses, Kamito instantly began to search around.

"...By the way, I might as well try this."

Searching his uniform pocket, he took out a communications spirit crystal.

Infusing a little divine power through his fingers, he concentrated his awareness--

kx,kxkxkx--kxkx,kx--

Bringing it to his ear, all he could hear was the noise of static.

"...No use. Oh well, I never expected it to either. So, what about this?"

Next, Kamito took out a different type of spirit crystal and quietly chanted the words for releasing.

In it was sealed a «Guide Spirit» which was very handy during times when lost.

Kamito had caught it in the «Spirit Forest» near the Academy before the «Blade Dance» started.

The fairy of light was quickly summoned and began to fly casually in front of Kamito's nose.

"Tell me, which way is north?"

Might as well try asking--

...However, the fairy simply tilted its little head and kept spinning in circles in the same spot.

"...Oh my, I guess I have no choice but to search on my own two feet."

Was this because an isolation barrier had been erected within the field, or was it a property of the abandoned city's land itself? In any case, clearly he could not rely on convenient spirit crystals.

Of course, this was already anticipated as soon as they heard the rules for the «Cross Fire» event.

Hopefully, he could meet up with at least one other member from «Team Scarlet» before night fell--

"...Hmm?"

At this moment, «Terminus Est» gave off faint light as it hung on his waist.

"...Est?"

Kamito touched the sacred sword's hilt and infused a little divine power--

Within the blink of an eye, the sword had transformed into an adorable silver-haired girl.

"What's the matter, Est?"

"Kamito, I recognize this place."

"What's the story?"

Indeed, Est was a spirit who had lived for centuries -- no, millennia.

Recognizing a place that had been a battlefield during the «Spirit War» was not anything too mindblowing.

However, the current Est was supposed to carry only the portion of power that split off from the original «Demon Slayer» when the contract with Kamito was established. Hence, only fragments of her memory remained--

"...Could it be that your memory returned?"

"No."

Est shook her head expressionlessly.

"But this scenery is indeed stored in my memory--"

--At this moment.

A terrifying presence suddenly appeared.

"...!?"

"Kamito, a terrible presence--"

"Yeah, I know."

Earlier, there were no presences around, not even spirits.

But now, Kamito could sense hostility so strong that it pricked his skin.

(An enemy elementalist? No--)

Instantly, as if spewing out from the earth, numerous shadows appeared in the surroundings.

"...What!?"

Humanoid shadows with ambiguous outlines.

"What, these guys!? They're... spirits?"

"These are the ghosts of destroyed spirits -- «Forsaken Spirits», Kamito."

"...The ghosts of spirits?"

"Yes. When spirits die with excessively strong resentment, sometimes they lose their spiritual qualities, becoming ghosts that linger in the ground -- This abandoned city seems to harbor large numbers of these ghosts."

"...I see. After all, this is the historical site of a battlefield."

Muttering, Kamito licked his parched lips.

Although spirits had all sorts of forms, these ghosts were all generic humanoid without exception. Did all spirits all become like this when their spiritual qualities were lost--?

The ghosts gave off resentful noises as they reached out towards Kamito.

Kamito frantically held Est's hand as he dodged the arms coming from all directions.

"...Tsk, these guys are not targeting me but Est!?"

"Apparently so, Kamito. Very likely, I--"

As if trying to smother Est's words--

The «Forsaken Spirit» swarm attacked once again.

"...Tsk!"

"Ah, Kamito!?"

Kamito swiftly embraced Est with both arms and took a flying leap.

"Dealing with them one at a time would take forever. We must break through in one go, Est."

"Yes. I am your sword, your wish is my command--"

Est nodded in midair.

--You, Dispassionate Queen of Steel, sacred sword that destroys evil!

--Here in this time and place, take form as the sword of steel to become the power in my hand!

As the «Spirit Seal» gave off dazzling light, a shining silver-white sword immediately appeared in Kamito's hand.

"Sorry, I don't have time to handle your obsessions."

Wielding the strongest elemental waffe, Kamito charged into the swarm of ghosts.



"...The wind blows with much hindrance, this place."

Her ponytail swaying in the wind, Ellis murmured with a surprised expression.

The spatial «Leap» had transported Ellis to the interior of a massive building in the ruins.

This was a place like a great hall, covered all over by a collapsing ceiling.

In the center of the hall, the crumbling remains of an altar stood there in a pile. Very likely, this place was used as a shrine in ancient times to make offerings to spirits.

"O Wind--"

Ellis spread her arms in the air and summoned the wind.

But the wind that usually responded to her call was silent now.

All she could hear were faint background noises.

(...I cannot sense the presence of spirits. The leylines have also been ripped completely apart, right?)

She gnashed her teeth in her mind.

--A battlefield site from the «Spirit War». One would find it difficult to imagine such a place as appropriate for performing blade dances in offering.

The «Elemental Lords», why would they select a place like this as the stage for the most important festival ceremony?

(...Anyway, I must hurry and meet up with Kamito and the rest.)

Although she had been sending out «Wind» for reconnaissance, under such conditions of chaotic leylines, they probably could not fly very far.

As expected, she had to search on her own two feet.

In order to walk out of these ruins, Ellis turned to the massive stairway in the hall. Just at this moment.

The wind shuddered slightly.

"...!?"

Ellis halted immediately and tensed her body.

(--Someone is approaching?)

She instantly summoned her demon wind spirit «Simorgh», releasing it as her elemental waffe «Ray Hawk».

With wind swirling around the spear tip, she stayed high alert of her surroundings.

(There is no sign of anyone near, however...)

Instantly, the ground beneath her shook.

(...Down below!?)

Ellis instantly made the decision to chant «Flight» magic and jumped directly upwards.

Immediately, a giant plant emerged from the position where she had been standing.

Numerous wriggling vines extended and chased after Ellis as she flew through the air.

"What--!"

Faced with the unexpected attack, Ellis reacted an instant too slow.

The vines swiftly entangled her ankle and dragged Ellis towards the ground.

"Watch this--"

Turning «Ray Hawk» around in a backhand grip in midair, she severed the vines--

However, in the next instant, she was suddenly struck with searing pain.

(...This is paralytic poison!?)

Her concentration broken, «Flight» magic dispelled, Ellis fell straight towards the ground.

Just as her body was about to crash onto the surface--

--Evil winds, go and rampage!"

Ellis unleashed «Ray Hawk»'s full power.

The released tempest sliced open the ground, protecting Ellis from the impact of her fall.

Rolling on the ground, Ellis tried to stand up but her movements were hindered by one paralyzed leg.

"Guh, what on earth..."

A massive plant that suddenly burrowed out from the ground.

In the center where a vivid red flower blossomed--

--Using wind to neutralize the impact. Not bad at all."

A girl stood upright.

"You... are...!"

Mysterious jade-green hair. Ominous red eyes shining with the light of disaster.

Ellis had seen that appearance of hers, dressed in the Theocracy's military uniform, at the «True Sanctuary» before the main event.

(I remember her, a member of «Team Inferno»--)

Although she had covered her face with a hood back then -- There could be no mistake.

Those sharp and pointy ears were the characteristics of the Elfim race.

"...Tsk, there was not supposed to be any presence of elementalists in the area--"

"Oh, you mean those wind spirits you released in the surroundings? How could those things possibly locate one such as I who had been specially trained in covert operations?"

The girl shrugged as if it could not be helped.

"Indeed, wind elementalists are excellent for gathering intelligence and searching for the enemy. However, whether in the use of spirits or concealment of your presence, you are rather amateur."

(...So my location was found by a reverse trace...!)

As a knight, Ellis was not an expert in intelligence in the first place. Even though she had undergone training for the sake of the «Blade Dance», it was true that she could improve her flexibility in the usage of wind.

Even so, she never expected her location to be discovered so easily--

Ellis once again examined the girl's contracted spirit.

A spirit in the form of a fearsome plant -- undoubtedly it was a minion possessing the earth attribute.

(...The earth attribute, in other words, the type to search for enemies by sensing vibrations in the ground, right?)

The Elfim race had superior hearing compared to ordinary humans. Following the sound of footsteps, pinpointing the location probably was not a very difficult task.

(My opponent appears to be alone, however...)

Using «Ray Hawk» for support, Ellis stood up unsteadily. Her left leg was hurting but at least the sensation of pain implied that the leg was not completely paralyzed.

(...What should I do?)

The girl before her was a member of the strongest team participating, «Team Inferno».

However, since this girl was an elementalist specializing in intelligence gathering, her combat ability should not be too high. If this girl, in charge of seeking out the enemy, was defeated here, then they could fight «Team Inferno» under more favorable conditions--

(However...)

Ellis halted this line of thinking at the very edge.

During the meeting, «Team Scarlet» had decided -- Never fight a battle alone.

Within their team, Ellis was the only one able to use search type magic. If she were defeated here, the team's gathering would be delayed greatly.

(Compared to a knight's honor, my companion's victory is currently more important--!)

Instantly making her decision, Ellis chanted a spirit language incantation.

"O Wind, sweep away mine enemies -- «Wind Bombs»!"

Instantly, intense shockwaves of wind were released from Ellis' hands.

However, the target was not the girl before her.

The violent mass of wind blew up the sand and dirt on the ground, obscuring visibility in a large area.

At the same time, Ellis jumped toward the great stairway at the entrance to the ruins.

Using the momentum of the strong winds she instantly left the scene--

(...Guh, my leg!?)

However, intense pain suddenly flared up once more.

The paralytic poison seemed to be truly taking effect now.

--However, she could not stop.

If she failed to make use of this sudden attack to escape, there was probably no other chance.

"I won't let you escape. Catch her, demon tree spirit «Titania»!"

Amidst the cloud of sand and dust, numerous vines chased after Ellis.

--Tsk, evil wind, go and rampage!"

Looking back, Ellis immediately swung «Ray Hawk».

The released blades of wind instantly chopped apart the vines.

"That kind of thing--"

However, the demon tree spirit's vines instantly regenerated. Then split into several bundles, they attacked as if trying to entangle Ellis' body.

"I am the witch who gallops across the blue sky -- «Air Wings»!"

Just as she was about to be captured by a prison of vines, Ellis chanted magic for high speed flight.

Instantly releasing the wind gathered around her feet, she flew as fast as she could to a spot near the ceiling of the great hall.

(That demon tree spirit's attack range should not be unlimited--)

I will take this opportunity to escape outside -- Just as Ellis was thinking that to herself.

Amidst the dust cloud that obscured visibility, something flashed.

(...A knife!?)

Ellis frantically attempted to evade--

However, it was impossible to rapidly adjust one's posture in midair.

The knife's blade grazed her chest armor, producing a grating metallic noise.

(It missed? No--)

Suddenly, killing intent could be sensed -- *coming from above Ellis in flight.*

"What--!"

Looking up at the collapsing ceiling, Ellis was rendered speechless.

Wielding a knife in reverse grip, the girl kicked against the ceiling surface and descended rapidly.

(Did she use «Flight» magic as well!?)

--No, that's impossible.

The demon tree spirit was without a doubt an earth attribute minion.

The system under the earth attribute should not contain any «Flight» magic.

"Take this--!"

Ellis hastily swiveled «Ray Hawk» and used the shaft to block the knife strike--

--How naive. Such stale and old-fashioned knightly combat techniques."

The girl used the spear shaft as support to make a leap.

Once again, she kicked the ceiling to rapidly reverse her direction and unleashed an even more penetrating slash.

(...This type of movement is!?)

Ellis suddenly noticed.

--They were very similar to Kamito's.

Different from normal combat skills, they involved unrestrained three-dimensional movement in myriad forms.

"Could this be the same as Kamito--"

"The same? That would be rather rude to him--"

In that instant, the directly thrust knife made a shallow slash across Ellis' arm.

The wound itself was not critical. But immediately--

"...Ooh, ah...!"

Intense pain traveled all over her body like an electrical current.

Seizing this momentary opening, numerous vines restrained Ellis' entire body, tying her up into a bundle and dragging her along the ground.

"...Ah, guh..."

Sharp thorns tore through Ellis' tights and buried into her flesh, completely immobilizing her.

Completely deprived of her freedom, Ellis watched as the demon tree spirit user landed quietly.

"Number Seven of the «Instructional School» -- the «Venom», Lily Flame."

"...!"

"First I shall start with disposing of you--"

The vines entangling Ellis' body all moved at once.



"...N-Noooooooooooo!"

In a little alley in the abandoned city where trees grew twisted and misshapen, a girl's screams were heard.

Fianna was desperately fleeing from the swarming «Forsaken Spirits» that kept emerging.

Terrifying shadowy arms were reaching towards her from all directions.

"D-Don't you dare touch me so easily, the only one allowed to touch me is Kamito-kun!"

As she swiftly gestured and chanted defensive magic, the ghosts withdrew their arms as if out of fear.

...However, faced with the burgeoning ranks of the swarming «Forsaken Spirits», these efforts amounted to nothing but a drop in the bucket.

Sending them reeling only momentarily, in a blink of an eye, the ghosts' numbers increased further and continued to give chase.

--«Georgios», I command you to cut down all who disobey!"

The knight spirit silently followed the imperial princess' orders.

Wielding a sacred sword with both hands, he cleared away the swarming ghosts before him in a single sweep.

Seizing the opportunity of the pathway opened momentarily, Fianna sprinted out.

--From a while ago, this had been repeating again and again.

"...It's really not the time to be bogged down in a place like this--"

Holding a strategic role within the team, it was more important for Fianna to converge with her teammates more than anyone else.

By herself, it was impossible to bring out the true worth of the powerful elemental waffe «Save the Queen». Furthermore, she was the only person in the team who could use true healing magic.

--Suddenly at this time.

The «Forsaken Spirits» who occupied the area suddenly halted in their motions.

"...W-What?"

A strange silence descended.

It was like the calm before a storm--

ROOOOOOOAAAAAAR--!

"Yah!"

Immediately, a terrifying roar shook the atmosphere, causing the ground to shake.

The vibrations caused the sand and dust accumulated on the ground to blow around.

In response, the knight spirit swiftly readied his shield and protected Fianna from the flying debris.

(What powerful divine power--!)

It was a bone-chilling feeling of terror.

Fianna looked up towards the direction of the roar.

Then--

(That thing, what is it...?)

In the center of the abandoned city, a massive pillar of fire rose.

A pillar of fire that reached the sky, sweeping up all the debris around it.

Even though she was quite far away from it, Fianna could still feel the heat scorching her skin.

"...Flame spirit?"

It was not Claire's hell cat spirit.

These were more terrifying flames -- demonic flames that destroyed all existence.

"..."

Fianna held her breath and gazed in that direction--

Only to see the massive burning pillar of flame gradually change its form after a while.

Spewing flames continuously, it was a torso that resembled black lava.

The eyes were like high temperature furnaces, flashing red light, as smoke was emitted nonstop from the mouth.

Gripped in its hand was a massive whip of flames.

That -- was essentially a vicious demon.

--The militarized spirit designated for sealing, «Valaraukar»!"

Fianna had seen this appearance in the «Divine Ritual Institute»'s resource materials before.

The demon flame spirit that was sent into combat towards the end of the Ranbal War. However, it was reportedly too unstable and was sealed and abandoned after being used twice--

(...Dragging that kind of thing here, what on earth are they thinking?)

--A this moment, Fianna suddenly noticed.

The swarm of ghosts that gathered in the area had vanished without a trace like an ebbing tide.

"...Why?"

Fianna frowned.

Immediately, an unbelievable sight entered her view.

Over in the distance, in the center of the abandoned city--

Swarming in hundreds, thousands, «Forsaken Spirits» were attacking the vicious demon of flame.

Faced with the onslaught of ghosts, the vicious demon of flame swept them all away with the massive whip.

However, the «Forsaken Spirits» continued to jump into the burning flames like moths drawn to a fire.

"...?"

This incredible scene caused Fianna to stand there dumbfounded--

"I-I must take this opportunity to escape out of this place... Let's go, «Georgios»!"

Brought back to her senses, Fianna and the knight spirit ran out of the alley together.



In the outskirts of the abandoned city, strange trees grew on the city walls.

Located on the edge of a bell tower extending out from the city walls--

--My, how you all have fallen."

A girl smiled tenderly, wearing a dress colored in shade of darkness.

Pristine white complexion. Beautiful black wings sprouted from her back with lustrous splendor.

Her dusk-colored eyes gazed upon the massive swarm of shadows.

These were ghosts of the spirits who had perished in the «Spirit War» of the past.

Disobeying the logic of the world, they were filthy existences that lingered, sustained purely by hatred and resentment.

"...Oh well, it's not like I'm in a much better position either."

The darkness spirit girl whispered in self-deprecation.

"After all, three years ago on that day, *I became an existence that was no longer myself.*"

Driven by hatred, the ghosts surged forth all at once, intending to devour her.

"However, I still -- cannot become the likes of you."

Restia narrowed her eyes slightly.

"Black thunder that incinerates even souls to nothingness -- «Hell Blast»!"

She mercilessly released high level wide area annihilation magic.

Out burst forth jet black lightning, instantly wiping out the the surging swarm of «Forsaken Spirits».

This was overwhelming power as befitting the highest ranking spirit.

However--

(...Looks like the corrosion has already advanced greatly.)

Pressing her hand against her chest, a painful moan escaped from Restia's lips.

Restia's original power was not merely at this level.

Starting three years ago, when the pitch black «Wish» of the «Elemental Lords» devoured her that day, her very existence had been gradually corroding from within.

Over half of what constituted her being had already been lost.

Making things worse was the fact that her remaining power had been greatly depleted by the fight with Kamito a few days ago.

"Who knows how much longer I can hold out for..."

Restia's heel flattened a ghost lying sprawled on the ground.

"But I have a mission I must complete. I cannot allow myself to be destroyed here."

Surfacing in her mind was the face of the young man who exchanged promises with her on that day.

"I must let Kamito awaken as the «Demon King»--"

Just at this moment.

"--?"

She noticed a new presence.

The footsteps of stiff military boots could be heard climbing up the spiral staircase of stone.

Not a spirit. This was an elementalist's presence, emanating intense divine power.

"I knew it, the wounds you sustained during my defeat at Kazehaya Kamito's hands still have not recovered, darkness spirit."

"..."

Appearing forth -- a young blonde female knight wielding a glorious sacred sword.

The «Paladin» -- Luminaris Saint Leisched.

"Ara, greetings to you. The young lady from three years ago."

Restia removed herself from the outer wall where trees were growing all over.

This was a precautionary reaction towards her opponent's power.

During the «Blade Dance» three years ago, Restia had never revealed her human form in public.

However, this girl had apparently discerned Restia's true identity already.

"Do you have business with me?"

--Yes."

The young female knight swiftly readied her sword.

"I have come to exterminate the darkness spirit who stands as the world's enemy -- You."

Kicking against the stone tiled floor, she instantly closed the distance.

The vigorous and forceful thrust tore through the air like thunder.

In response, Restia spread her wings and immediately escaped to the air to evade--

"...!"

In the next instant, numerous arrows of light pierced one of her wings.

(...An ambush from a nearby tower!?)

--I see. So she dared to make her appearance in order to draw attention away from the ambuscade over there.

With a scattering of jet black feathers and her black wing pierced, Restia lost balance and fell on the stone tiles.

"Success!"

Luminaris turned and made another thrust.

"...Tsk, disappear from my sight -- «Hell Blast»!"

Losing composure, Restia once again released a ball of jet black lightning.

However--



"--Evil be purged, «Sacred Shield»!"

Luminaris immediately released defensive spirit magic. Easily deflecting spirit magic of the highest level, she sliced through Restia's remaining intact wing.

The matchup between darkness and holy attributes was the worst. Furthermore, Luminaris was undoubtedly contracted to a high ranking spirit. In a one-on-one fight, Restia had little chance of victory.

"...You've grown in strength, young lady."

"Don't look down on others, darkness spirit."

The sword elemental waffe swept horizontally. Even the dress of darkness which could deflect all magic was tragically seared and torn, simply when grazed by the holy light emanating from the sword's blade.

However, trying to escape through the air would end up being a target for the ambuscade again.

These wings that are currently of no use, might as well be abandoned.

"Blow forth and howl, tempest of the demon sword -- «Blade Storm»!"

Just as Luminaris swung the sacred sword, making a shallow slash across Restia's shoulder blade--

The feathered wings scattered into countless blades which then flew towards Luminaris.

This was indefensible anti-human magic for killing and maiming. Nevertheless--

"--You have finally revealed an opening, darkness spirit."

The Paladin's face displayed a smile of pity--

Without even taking any defensive posture, she charged forward directly.

"...!?"

"Holy lance that vanquishes darkness -- «Lance of Longinus»!"

Amidst the howling tempest of blades, Luminaris raised her arm.

--Then from a magic circle appearing in the air, she summoned a lance.

(That is..!)

Restia instantly understood. --The nature of that weapon.

(Imbued with anti-darkness magic, a piece of «Divine Armament»...!)

Despite suffering innumerable wounds, the Paladin continued to charge through the swirling blades.

Performing powerful spirit magic left the caster vulnerable for a brief period afterwards.

Luminaris had been waiting for this particular instant.

--Enemy of the world, return to eternal darkness!"

The thrown «Lance of Longinus» pierced Restia in the chest.

Chapter Four

Demon Sword of Darkness

Covered by a vast expanse of trees were the ruins of the massive city.

"...Sigh, how unfortunate. Of all places I ended up here on the very edge of the city."

Claire pouted with displeasure as she ran amidst collapsed ruins.

She had been transported to the outer edges quite far away from the center of the abandoned city.

From appearance, it seemed quite easy to get outside despite the high surrounding walls because there were crumbling sections all over the place. However, due to the powerful barrier raised by the «Elemental Lords» outside the city walls, neither humans nor spirits were able to exit.

"Meow--!"

At this moment, Scarlet walked ahead with its ears raised, staring at the center of the abandoned city.

--In the next instant, accompanied by a roaring rumble, a massive pillar of fire rose up from the center.

"...!?"

Claire felt an intense shiver along her spine.

"What a truly powerful spirit..."

They were unlike Scarlet's noble flames.

These belonged to the same type as «Demon Flames» that spread violence and destruction.

(...Whose contracted spirit is that?)

Neither the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor» nor the «Sacred Spirit Knights» should have a flame elementalist on such a level.

Or could it be the contracted spirit of that «Ren Ashbell» --?

(...No, that's not right.)

Claire ruled out the possibility mentally.

During the battle in the forest, Ren Ashbell did indeed use spirit magic classified under the flame system.

However, the burning pillar of fire here did not give off the same impression as her.

Abandoning control over a spirit, simply unleashing great power recklessly -- This was not like her.

(Speaking of an elementalist who "drives" spirits in this manner...)

...Claire had an idea.

The gray-haired girl who addressed Kamito as Onii-sama.

«Team Inferno»'s user of militarized spirits -- Muir Alenstarl of the «Instructional School».

Reportedly, by employing tactical-class militarized spirits, she annihilated several teams singlehandedly.

Apparently, she was using an even more powerful militarized spirit in the finals.

(...So the fighting has already started.)

Claire felt slightly worried.

(Could it be, Kamito is fighting...?)

She could not deny such a possibility.

In any case, it was necessary to first investigate the power of the demon flame spirit.

"Scarlet, which path will lead there?"

"Meow--?"

The hell cat spirit inclined its head as if greatly troubled.

"...Oh right. You're just a cat, after all."

Claire shrugged slightly.

The massive abandoned city was probably the type whose structure became more complicated the closer one reached the center.

Without the use of a «Guide Spirit», it was probably not that easy to get close.

"...Night would probably fall before I reach that place."

--Just as Claire sighed.

"...?"

From some place, the sound of weapons clashing could be heard faintly.

(...Someone is engaged in blade dance?)

Claire suddenly held her breath and swiftly looked around.

The noises sounded quite near. However, there were no signs of people around.

"Meow, meow--!"

"...Above?"

Reminded by Scarlet's voice, Claire looked up towards the overcast sky, and in that instant--

"...!"

She could see a girl falling down from a nearby bell tower.

Accompanied by the scattering of black feathers, the falling girl was wearing a dress.

(She is--)

Even from a distance, Claire was sure she recognized correctly.

That dress the color of the dark night and those beautiful black wings.

(Kamito's darkness spirit, why is she here!?)

Claire screamed out in her mind.

"W-We must hurry over there, Scarlet!"

Swiftly chanting the words for releasing the elemental waffe, she formed the hell cat spirit into a flaming whip.

To this date, that darkness spirit had engaged in secret machinations many times, making moves on Kamito.

Although the situation was unclear, Claire decided it was a rare opportunity.

(...I must catch her, in order to find out what exactly she is planning!)

Relying simply on her sense of direction, Claire rushed into the maze-like ruins to head towards the bell tower.

Like her elder sister, the outstanding princess maiden, Claire's intuition was rather keen.

After walking a certain distance--

(I remember she was falling somewhere near here--)

Claire halted and swept her gaze over the surrounding scattered debris.

Normally, one should search for a spirit by following the trail of divine power, but due to the chaotic mess of the abandoned city's leylines, that method was no longer available.

Flametongue in hand, Claire advanced cautiously.

Even if wounded, that darkness spirit was still a powerful high-ranking spirit. She could not afford to be careless.

Also--

(...The one who struck down the darkness spirit should still be nearby.)

As soon as they encountered each other, a battle was most likely inevitable.

Suddenly.

"...Ooh, ah..."

"...!?"

Carried by the wind, a soft moan entered Claire's ears.

Claire immediately headed towards the direction of the sound.

Only to find over there--

A faintly glimmering black feather fallen on the ground.

"It's a feather from that darkness spirit."

As soon as she picked it up, the feather dissipated into particles of light.

...On further examination, similar feathers were scattered all over the floor in the area.

"...Ooh... Ah..."

The voice was heard again. --This time, it sounded very near.

Swiftly suppressing the sound of her footfall, Claire circled the wall to the other side where the voice came from.

"...!"

--Over there.

The darkness spirit girl was lying on the rubble moaning, her lovely face displaying an expression of suffering.

The dress of darkness was torn open. Her black feathers were scattered pitifully.

Her pale complexion displayed bluish pallidity while her dusk-colored eyes gradually dimmed.

Furthermore--

Her left chest was pierced by a massive lance.

"Y-You, why..."

"...Ara, what a coincidence... Miss Hell Cat..."

Noticing Claire, the girl -- Restia -- shifted her dusk-colored gaze towards her.

Her lovely cherry lips twisted as if in self-mockery.

"Oh for shame... To let you witness me... In such a situation, ooh, ah..."

Halfway through her sentence, she contorted her body painfully.

The holy light emitted by the lance was causing her pain, making her suffer.

(That is radiance of the holy attribute...?)

Claire suddenly recalled.

"You must have been defeated by the «Sacred Spirit Knights»!"

Last night, Ellis had mentioned during the strategy meeting. The Holy Kingdom of Lugia's «Sacred Spirit Knights» had apparently brought «Divine Armaments» from their home country.

«Divine Armaments» were the most effective magical equipment for capturing darkness spirits. As soon as they struck the target, they continued to deal holy damage persistently.

(...However, why would the «Sacred Spirit Knights» want to get rid of this darkness spirit?)

"...Yah... Ah..."

"W-Wait a moment, you're forcing yourself too far!"

"...I... cannot, in this kind... of place...!"

"...!"

Claire held her breath.

This darkness spirit girl was always smiling with composure.

But now her face was frowning from the pain as she panted desperately.

Even though her body was being scorched by holy light, she still--

--Kami...to..."

The instant her lips uttered that name--

Claire's hands naturally sprang into action.

"L-Let me through!"

Grabbing the holy lance that pierced Restia's chest, Claire pulled it out in one swift motion--!

"...Ooh, ah...!"

Restia stared with her dusk-colored eyes wide open.

"..."

As for Claire--

She stared at her own two hands as if unable to believe what she had just done.

Why on earth did I do that...?

"...What are your intentions, Miss Hell Cat?"

Restia breathed heavily as she stared at Claire.

...Claire was at a loss for words.

"...I-I don't know either, why."

This darkness spirit was without a doubt an enemy of Claire and her team.

She was the one responsible for the giant spirit going berserk at the Academy town as well as Jio Inzagi's assault on the Academy.

During the «Tempest», she had even used the monster Nepenthes Lore to destroy Team Scarlet's «stronghold».

Even Claire herself was almost killed by her.

Honestly speaking, Claire had neither reason nor obligation to help her at all.

--Nevertheless, her body acted on its own.

Restia continued to gaze at Claire suspiciously.

Claire could not help but avert eye contact.

"A-After all, you -- you are Kamito's contracted spirit."

That was what she said.

How precious of an existence this darkness spirit girl was in Kamito's heart, Claire had a pretty good idea.

This was the girl who bestowed a human heart upon Kamito who had been raised as an assassin by the «Instructional School». Kamito's reason for entering the «Blade Dance» this time was getting her back.

Deep bonds, completely irreplaceable, existed between the two of them.

...As this thought crossed her mind, Claire felt an inexplicable stinging pain in her chest.

"If you disappeared from this world, Kamito will be very sad. That's why I'm helping you."

Claire returned her gaze towards Restia.

"A-And also, I have many things I want to ask you. How could I let you die so easily in this kind of place?"

"..."

"Follow me, darkness spirit."

"You really think I will obey you?"

"Don't look down on me. Even if I need to resort to force I will take you away with me."

--You, are you able to do that?"

Restia smiled and stood up unsteadily.

In this manner, they stared each other in the eye for several seconds--

Suddenly Restia collapsed like an unstrunged puppet.

"H-Hey!?"

Claire reflexively caught Restia in her arms.

Instantly, Restia's body began to dissipate in the air as particles of light.

"W-What? ...What on earth is going on!?"

"Ku..."

Her beautiful face twisting in regret, the darkness spirit girl continued to disappear.

Just as her figure completely dissipated, a sharp metallic noise rang out with a clang.

"...This is?"

Claire held her breath.

A sword had fallen on the ground where Restia was just now.

A blade of darkness displaying sleek splendor -- a straight sword for one-handed use.

Invoking admiration of its beauty in the viewer, yet leaving an ominous impression, this was the demon sword of darkness.

Apparently she had transformed from her human appearance to her demon sword form due to overexhaustion.

It followed the same principle as Est going to sleep in sword form.

"...That holy lance was imbued with a «Geis»."

It was a spell for severing the «Circuit» that connected a spirit to its main body, forcing the spirit to remain in this world. Mainly used to capture high ranking spirits, it prevented the target from returning to the location of its main body for several days.

Claire reached out towards the demon sword on the ground.

--Just at that moment.

A presence appeared behind her.

--Who!?"

Turning around immediately, Claire swung Flametongue.

However, the flaming crimson slash was deflected by a shining magical shield--!

"...Ah, you are--!"

The one who appeared was a blonde female knight in the uniform of the «Sacred Spirit Knights».

"...Luminaris Saint Leisched."

Claire groaned in her throat.

(...Foreseeably, almost the worst possible situation.)

To encounter an ace-level elementalist as her first combat opponent, truly rotten luck it was.

"Hand that demon sword over. Ordesia's hell cat user."

Luminaris approached completely without apprehension.

Despite the many wounds on her person, presumably from her battle with Restia, her sense of presence was quite intimidating.

Claire swiftly picked up the demon sword and wielded Flametongue in one hand.

"Dame Luminaris, why are you targeting this darkness spirit?"

Faced with Claire's question--

"Who knows. The reason was not disclosed to us."

"...What do you mean by that?"

"We are simply executing orders issued by «Des Esseintes»."

"«Des Esseintes»--"

It referred to a political organization at the very core of the Holy Kingdom of Lugia. Apparently, the kingdom's politics were actually dictated by «Des Essentes» from behind the queen.

--Wow, what a truly loyal dog, devoted to your mission."

"Let us dispense with the idle chatter. Hurry and hand the darkness spirit over."

Luminaris' warning increased in the sharpness of its tone.

"I intended to complete this mission as quickly as possible, to settle things conclusively with the matter of Ren Ashbell from three years ago. After all, I am not in peak condition either. Therefore if you hand that thing over obediently, I will pretend I never saw you."

"..."

--Not an unattractive proposal.

Despite her wounds, Luminaris still was not an opponent Claire could handle on her own.

She probably would keep her word. Even though it was only a verbal promise, prideful elementalists generally did not go back on their promises once given.

"What is there to hesitate about? Isn't that darkness spirit an enemy to your side as well?"

Was she feeling anxious because Claire did not answer? Luminaris took another step forward.

"..."

--Right, Restia was without a doubt «Team Scarlet»'s enemy.

She was definitely planning to make use of Kamito in some plan.

(However...)

Claire tightly gripped the demon sword in her hand.

"I hate this..."

"...What?"

"Dame Luminaris, I am sorry but I will not hand this darkness spirit over to you."

Staring straight at Luminaris before her, Claire answered.

No matter what, Restia was Kamito's precious contracted spirit.

If she were to disappear, Kamito will surely be sad.

(...In that case, I must protect her well!)

"Foolish--"

Luminaris sighed with exasperation.

"Then I shall retrieve it by force!"

Instantly stepping against the ground to gain speed, she rushed forward, swinging her fist with sacred combat energy.

Claire instantly reacted. Using Flametongue to strike the floor, she made the rubble explode.

She did not expect to deal damage but at least it would provide a visual distraction.

Seizing the opportunity, Claire jumped backwards greatly.

"Go forth and devour, scorching ball of conflagration -- «Fireball»!"

--Flames be vanquished, «Sacred Shield»!"

Luminaris instantly chanted defensive magic to deflect the incoming «Fireball».

Her chanting speed was quite fast. Not only was she adept in martial arts, she was also quite skilled in controlling her elemental waffe.

Ignoring the obstacle of flame, Luminaris kept charging forward.

(...How could this happen!?)

The instant just before she was about to strike with the fist infused with combat energy--

Luminaris halted in her steps.

"...?"

From the crevices in the rubble, numerous shadowy arms reached out to restrain her.

(W-What...?)

"...Damn these ghosts of the abandoned city, to think they dare interfere at this time!"

The swarm of shadows crept out onto the surface continuously.

It seemed like they were reacting to the holy power Luminaris had released.

(...A-Although I don't quite get what's going on, it's an excellent opportunity!)

Releasing dazzling flames in all directions, Claire took the demon sword of darkness and began to flee.



"These guys just keep coming no matter how many I fight off...!"

With dazzling brilliance, the «Demon Slayer» swept clear a group of «Forsaken Spirits».

Numerous shadows disappeared into nothingness, accompanied by screams filled with resentment.

--However, their numbers showed no signs of abating.

"I don't have time for dealing with you guys right now--!"

Spinning around to unleash a slash, Kamito cut down the shadows approaching from behind.

Even famous spirits in the past would lose most of their original power once they became lingering ghosts.

The troublesome thing was that contact with the shadows resulted in contamination, thereby consuming divine power. If one were to recklessly charge through the swarms, divine power would probably be depleted in short time.

This characteristic was extremely similar to the dark monster brought by Restia, «Nepenthes Lore».

Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh--!

Within the blink of an eye, Kamito found himself surrounded heavily again as he wiped the sweat off his brow.

The blade of «Terminus Est» in his hand also lost its radiance gradually.

Naturally, the contamination from the «Forsaken Spirits» affected the elemental waffe as well.

Although Est was crowned with the title of the «Demon Slayer» for vanquishing the Demon King, in actual fact, she was not a spirit possessing the holy attribute but a sword spirit with the attribute of «Steel».

She did possess the power to purify filth.

In other words, every time Est made contact with the ghosts in battle, her power kept being consumed.

If this continued, Est would reach her limit before even engaging elementalists from opposing teams.

(...Tsk, this is bad.)

--Just as Kamito clicked his tongue mentally.

The back of his left hand began to hurt intensely.

"...Guh, ah...!"

Intense scorching pain caused Kamito to utter cries of suffering.

Taking off his leather glove for a look, he found blood dripping down his wrist to the ground.

Normally, the «Spirit Seal» was barely visible but now it was shining with intense light.

(...Restia!?)

Ever since that day three years ago, the «Spirit Seal» on his left hand had never reacted this strongly before.

"Guh, what on earth...!"

Kamito stabbed the «Demon Slayer» into the ground to stop himself from falling over.

Along the way, the «Forsaken Spirits» swarmed in all at once.

If Kamito were to get caught and entangled, his divine power would be utterly drained and he could even lose his life.

(--How could I let you guys succeed!)

Kamito infused maximum divine power into the «Demon Slayer»:

"Absolute Blade Arts -- Third Form, Shadowmoon Waltz!"

He unleashed the anti-army technique of the Absolute Blade Arts.

Resembling the image of the moon reflected on water, this swaying slash was delivered like a quick dance.

A slash followed by a spin, further followed by a slash after the spin.

Even when dozens of enemies surrounded him, they were unable to touch even his sleeve.

Unleashing slashes like a storm, Kamito broke through the barricade.

His overwhelming destructive power swept the area clear of ghosts.

"Huff, huff, huff--"

Putting his sword away, Kamito kept panting.

Using movements that surpassed the limits of his body caused all his muscles to scream in pain.

...I knew it, Greyworth's Absolute Blade Arts take too much of a toll on the body.

Furthermore, slicing «Forsaken Spirits» also caused contamination in «Terminus Est»'s blade, causing its luster to dim progressively.

Despite the massive decrease in the number of ghosts, new ones kept crawling out without end.

"Damn it..."

Kamito's gaze rested on his left hand.

The scorching pain had calmed down and the glow of the «Spirit Seal» gradually disappeared.

"Restia--"

Putting on his leather glove again, Kamito called out her name.

Then.

--mito... Kami...to."

"...?"

Suddenly -- the wind whispered.

It was a vague sound, akin to the rustling of leaves brushing against one another.

Looking up suddenly, Kamito found a tiny butterfly-like fairy drifting in the wind.

(...Isn't that Ellis' wind spirit?)

No mistake about it. The one calling Kamito's name was Ellis' voice.

She was probably using spirits to carry her voice and broadcast to the surroundings.

(...Could she be nearby?)

Within this abandoned city, there should be no way to send out wind spirits a great distance due to their relatively weaker power. After all, low level spirits without well-defined wills would most likely be caught and eaten by the ghosts before they could travel far.

--At this time, the faint sound of weapons clashing could be heard from the distance.

"...!"

This time, it was not a sound carried by the wind.

Someone nearby was performing a blade dance.

"Ellis--"

Sweeping away swarms of ghosts with his sword, Kamito sprinted in the direction of the sound.



Her consciousness in a haze as if enshrouded by a thin layer of mist--

"...mi,to... Kami... to..."

Ellis repeated Kamito's name.

Perhaps because the poison secreted by the thorns of the demon tree spirit was spreading, she could not even lift a finger.

No, even without the paralysis, it was impossible to escape the vines entangling her entire body. Restraining her four limbs, the vines ripped apart her tights, burrowing sharp thorns into her supple flesh.

"...Ah, hah, ooh..."

Ellis felt like her body was burning.

The sense of debilitating sweetness caused Ellis to produce painful sighs.

"Guh... To think you would, use poison... Yah..."

"Assassins are unconcerned with the means employed. I have no reason to accommodate your sense of chivalry."

The orphan from the «Instructional School», Lily Flame, looked down at Ellis with merciless eyes.

"The demon tree spirit «Titania» was sealed in a sacred tree at the Elfim village. It is able to refine several hundred types of poisons, including

fatal poisons, paralytic poisons, hallucinogenic poisons and aphrodisiacs. However, fatal poisons cannot be used due to the disqualification rule--"

"Guh..."

The squirming vines dove beneath Ellis' uniform and began to search her bosom.

"Ooh, yah, ah....!"

They were trying to find the «Magic Stone» hidden in her uniform.

Once the «Magic Stone» was taken away, the owner's body would be forcibly teleported to «Ragna Ys» and retired from the «Blade Dance» unless the stone was retrieved within thirty seconds.

Pop. Pop pop.

As the buttons of the uniform popped off, the massive bosom clad in black underwear was exposed.

"...Ooooh..."

Ellis bit her lip hard in humiliation.

From her inside pocket, the «Magic Stone» rolled out.

"...With this, one member is eliminated from «Team Scarlet»."

Bending over, Lily tried to pick up the «Magic Stone».

"...No... Don't...!"

Ellis struggled and desperately reached out despite the vines entangling her arm.

Even though it made numerous scratch wounds on her arm, she still mustered all her strength.

"Guh... Ah....!"

"How unsightly, Ellis Fahrengart."

Lily swept Ellis' arm aside derisively.

"Ultimately, you people, who simply train as though you were playing in a sandbox, can't possibly defeat assassins who grew up in true hell."

"...What, did you say..."

Hearing that assertion--

Ellis gritted her teeth hard.

The faces of her comrades back at the Academy surfaced in her mind one after another.

--Rakka, Reishia, comrades of the «Sylphid Knights».

The foster elder sister Velsaria who prayed for Ellis' victory.

Last but not least, her four teammates who were fighting in the same match.

Lily's current assertion was equivalent to insulting all of Ellis' comrades back at the Academy.

"Take those words... Back--"

"...?"

"To call it playing in a sandbox -- Take those words back!"

Gathering divine power in both hands -- Ellis released it all in one go.

As sharply slicing winds began to blow, all the vines tying her up were severed.

--The paralytic poison's not working!? No--"

Lily Flame displayed alarm on her face.

Ellis swiftly reached out to the «Magic Stone» and grabbed it.

...The poison was actually working. Ellis' consciousness remained hazy and could barely remain standing.

Even so -- as one of the «Sylphid Knights», there were things she must defend at all costs.

"...For my comrades who entrusted dreams of victory to me--"

She released «Ray Hawk» in her right hand, a storm gathering at its front tip.

"I cannot be defeated in a place like this!"

"Tsk!"

Ellis swung «Ray Hawk» with all her might.

Faced with the onslaught of the swirling blades of wind--

Lily took a leap, evading the wind blades as she threw knives.

Two knives struck Ellis in the legs.

"Guh... Ah..."

Swallowing the scream she was about to emit, Ellis glared at the enemy before her.

Fortunately, the spreading paralytic poison reduced the intensity of the pain.

--If you stop resisting, you will be free of suffering soon."

Lily grumbled calmly as she snapped her fingers.

The severed vines of the demon tree spirit instantly regenerated.

"...Darn, to think it would have such regenerative powers...!"

For Ellis' elemental waffe which was geared towards slashing attacks, the demon tree spirit was a poor matchup.

If it were Claire's flame spirit or Rinslet's demon ice spirit instead, the fight would perhaps be more in their favor--

Ellis' entire field of view was hazy. In a poisoned state, she could not fully refine her divine power.

However--

(I cannot let my comrades back at the Academy witness an unsightly blade dance--)

«Ray Hawk»'s spear tip once again gathered wind.

A prolonged battle must be avoided. Victory had to be decided in one strike.

--Slaughter the foolish sacrifice, «Titania»!"

The countless wriggling vines all rushed towards Ellis.

In that instant.

"Fahrengart style of the spear, secret technique -- «Flash Gale»!"

The violent gale released with all her strength ended up penetrating the ground far from the target.

"A futile struggle--"

A jeering expression appeared on Lily's face.

At the same time, the demon tree spirit's vines reached into the dust cloud to capture Ellis--

"...What!?"

However, in the next instant -- Lily's expression froze.

Behind the dust cloud, Ellis could not be found.

--Is she above!?"

She suddenly realized -- But too late.

Hidden amongst the dust scattering and flying in the wind, Ellis had flown high up in the air.

(--Since my legs cannot move, I flew using the wind!)

"Success--!"

Riding the wind, she altered her trajectory in midair.

Firming her grasp of «Ray Hawk» which swelled with a violent gale, Ellis rapidly descended as she took aim at Lily on the ground.

BOOM--!

The instant the spear tip made contact with the ground, a storm erupted.

"...!"

In the very last second, Lily tried to evade.

However, her petite body was blown away, crashing hard into a wall.

Landing on the ground, Ellis accelerated once more, charging forth in order to deliver a decisive blow.

But already -- the wind had begun to lose coherence.

"Wha...!"

Losing balance, Ellis suddenly collapsed on the ground.

(...Oooh, my body, feels scorching hot...!)

The circulation of divine power had caused the paralytic poison to spread even faster.

As the wind enveloping her scattered, Ellis could hardly lift a finger.

"...Guh, just a little bit more..."

Ellis clawed at the sand on the floor surface, trying desperately to muster her final strength--

"...Too careless of me. I underestimated you."

However, the first to stand up was Lily Flame.

Although she suffered injuries from the attack just now, she was more than well enough to continue battling.

"However, further struggles are futile--"

--Not necessarily."

Suddenly.

In her hazy state of consciousness, Ellis heard a familiar voice.

"...What!?"

Lily Flame turned back to stare at the great staircase in the ruins.

(You, really...)

Seeing his figure in her gradually blurring vision, Ellis suddenly smiled.

(--Indeed, I was waiting for this voice.)

Ellis believed firmly he would surely come.

Hence she was able to persevere and continue fighting.

"...Ka...mito...!"

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Ellis."

Kamito jumped down from the great stairway and landed next to Ellis.

"...How... did you get here?"

"Ellis, your voice was carried by the wind."

"I... see--"

Kamito pressed a healing «Spirit Crystal» into Ellis' hand and stood up lightly. Then he turned towards Lily who had taken a combat stance.

"The fifth member of «Team Inferno» turns out to be you."

"Kamito..."

The Elfim girl groaned in her throat.

...Apparently, these two seemed to know each other.

But since they both came from the «Instructional School», that possibility had crossed Ellis' mind--

"I'm so glad, you and Muir are okay... Oh well, though reuniting in this manner was not what I hoped for."

Just as Kamito sighed.

"...Guh, go forth and slaughter, «Titania»!"

Responding to Lily's voice, the demon tree spirit's vines attacked Kamito.

--Kamito!"

Ellis cried out. --However, such worry was unnecessary.

Pulling out the «Demon Slayer», Kamito instantly severed all the vines.

"Stop it. You can't defeat me... I'm sure you know that quite well, right?"

"But..."

Lily bit her lip in chagrin.

"I-I'll retreat for now!"

She swiftly jumped towards the demon tree spirit that sprouted out of the ground.

Leaping inside the massive red flower, the petals instantly closed up and disappeared into the ground.

Within the blink of an eye, the demon tree spirit had swallowed Lily and disappeared without trace.

"...That kind of trick again. This girl sure loves fancy tricks just like the way she's always been."

Kamito could not help but exclaim.

"Ellis, are you okay?"

"Ah, hmm... Because you are here, ah..."

Still collapsed on the ground, Ellis nodded.

Immediately, her face suddenly became bright red.

"K-Kamito, say..."

"...Hmm?"

Suddenly, Kamito found his gaze being drawn to a certain location.

Those voluptuous breasts, clad in black underwear, fully exposed in view due to the unbuttoned uniform.

"S-Stop looking... Jerk!"

"S-Sorry...!"

Kamito frantically turned his gaze away as he blushed.

Chapter Five

Spirit Weapon

"...Here, it should be fine now."

"...Mmm... Hmm..."

Kamito picked up Ellis in his arms and carried her to a location a certain distance away from the center of the abandoned city.

These seemed to be the ruins of a massive shrine, where the ceiling was supported by stone columns on the verge of collapse.

Assigning Simorgh to keep watch outside, they stepped into the premises, only to see a spring in the depths of the shrine that was used for divine purification. Although the spring itself had long dried up, a large amount of rainwater had accumulated.

--Water spirits, pure and clear, exorcise this filth."

Chanting a spirit language incantation and tossing in a «Purification» spirit crystal caused the water to bubble instantly and turn clear.

Kamito laid down Ellis into the spring directly in her uniform.

"S-Sorry, Kamito..."

"Don't force yourself to speak. Conserve your stamina."

Turning his blushing face away, Kamito coughed lightly.

The drenched uniform clung tightly to Ellis' lithe body, an especially seductive sight.

Even though Kamito understood that now was not the time to turn his attention to those matters, he could not stop his gaze from being drawn to the black underwear showing underneath the drenched uniform.

"Th-This is all we can do for now as treatment. Do you feel any better?"

After all, using holy water for a bath was only emergency first aid.

If only Fianna who was skilled in healing were present. But for someone like Kamito who was unskilled in spirit magic, this was as much as he could do.

"Mmm, hmm, do not worry... Ah, ow..."

Ellis panted painfully.

Although elementalists had better poison resistance than ordinary people due to their advanced circulatory systems, unfortunately, the demon tree spirit's poison was far too powerful.

"Ooh... Ka... mito..."

Despite her irregular breathing, Ellis continued to call out Kamito's name in a hoarse voice.

In order to lessen her pain, the front of her uniform had been unfastened. Kamito's gaze was naturally drawn to the undulating cleavage.

(I-I can't let myself stare...!)

As if trying to dispel evil thoughts, Kamito shook his head.

"Your body, does it feel painful?"

"Ah, yeah..."

Ellis' body twisted in the spring that resembled a bathtub.

Biting hard on her glistening lips, she gazed at Kamito.

Then fidgeting with her fingers, she said:

"U-Uh, I hope you will not laugh, but..."

"Hmm?"

"H-Hand... Can we hold hands?"

--Ah sure. I got it."

Kamito instantly agreed and used both hands to lightly hold Ellis' hand.

"Hyah!"

Halfway in the process, Ellis gave off a cute little scream.

"...S-Sorry! Was I too sudden?"

"N-No, I should apologize instead. It is just that, I am not used to it, holding a boy's hand..."

The skin on her hand was as delicate and tender as that of ladies of nobility. However, due to constant martial training, there were some calluses on her palm.

"Ah, sob sob... I-I cannot believe I have done something so shameless..."

"...?"

Ellis' face was as red as a cooked octopus.

"B-By the way, Kamito..."

Suddenly, Ellis looked up to face Kamito.

"Yeah?"

"Th-That Elfim girl, was she your comrade in the past?"

The fingers holding the hand tightened slightly.

"..."

"N-No, if you do not want to answer, I will not force you to speak--"

"Oh no, it's not that reason... It's just, how should I put it, describing her as a comrade is a little off."

"Not a comrade...?"

Ellis frowned.

"C-Could she be... Your lover!?"

"What kind of logic is that!?"

Kamito objected loudly.

"Hmm, not your lover, I see... Very good."

Ellis breathed a sigh of relief.

...This motion of hers caused her massive bosom to quiver, way too conspicuously.

"Muir Alenstarl, Lily Flame and I were a tactical unit of three... Back then, we had no sense of camaraderie at all."

--Or rather, very likely, none of the kids raised in that insane facility ever had any understanding of the concept of "comrades."

(However, now--)

Kamito involuntarily tightened his grip on her hand.

(...I have comrades I wish to protect.)

This was strength he had never possessed as the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell.

--At this time, Kamito suddenly noticed.

"...?"

Ellis' hand in his grip felt quite hot.

Her usually bright and lively brown eyes currently looked rather unfocused.

"Ellis, do you have a fever?"

Kamito asked with worry.

It was not surprising for a demon tree spirit's poison to include symptoms of fever.

But in that case, although bathing was necessary for neutralizing the poison, the symptoms were exacerbated as a result.

"Do you want to get out first?"

"...No, d-do not worry... Ah..."

Suddenly, Ellis emitted a cute little scream as her hand let go.

"...E-Ellis, what's wrong?"

"Mmm... Ah, hah, mmm..."

Ellis panted as her wet arms and legs twisted in suffering.

"H-Hey, come on..."

Kamito grabbed her shoulders with worry.

"Mmm, hyah...!"

Immediately, Ellis' body shuddered intensely.

"Ah.. Haa, haa..."

She was blushing to her ears and her breathing was a complete mess.

Wrapped in the wet skirt, her legs were rubbing against each other coyly.

"Mmm, ooh... Ka, mito..."

Looking as though her breathing was petering out, Ellis finally spoke up.

"Ellis, what is going on!?"

"D-Dunno why... M-My body, suddenly feels burning hot, huah..."

"...Could it be that the slower-acting poison is now taking effect!?"

"...Hmm, c-come to think of it..."

Ellis panted with great suffering as she tried to form words.

"Th-That Elfim girl, did say... The demon tree spirit, ooh... Amongst the poisons it concocted, huah... Uh, there is also that kind, of effect..."

"...That kind of effect?"

Repeating her words, Kamito found Ellis lowering her gaze shyly.

"B-Basically, an... A-Aphrodisiac..."

"Aphrodisiac!?"

Kamito's voice was instantly turned inside out.

...What were known as aphrodisiacs were drugs that caused people to act in lustful ways.

"...Huah, mmm... Help, me, Kami... to..."

Embracing her bosom tightly, Ellis pleaded as she rubbed her legs together.

Probably because she was suffering, her pleading eyes were moist with tears.

"E-Even if you say that..."

Kamito held his breath.

...What on earth was he supposed to do?

"L-Let it stabilize, ooh... Once this hot flash passes..."

"...!?"

Sweet breath escaped from her glistening lips.

The stern maiden knight's enraptured eyes were emanating a dangerous aura of attraction.

(...Th-This is clearly a no good situation!)

Kamito shook his head vigorously in his mind.

If he did that kind of thing to the Fahrengart family's precious daughter -- a death sentence awaited him without escape.

However.

"...Haa, haa... Mmm... Ahuu..."

"..."

Hearing Ellis' pained breathing--

"...I-I got it!"

Kamito steeled himself and nodded.

...After all, she was suffering and he could not ignore it.

Still in uniform, Kamito entered the spring and embraced Ellis.

"...I-Is this better?"

"Mmmhmm..."

Ellis nodded. Her sweet breath blew against Kamito's ear.

Her soft bosom pressed against him through the drenched uniform, accommodating in shape with great suppleness.

Kamito's face instantly went red.

"...If you're feeling unbearable, don't fight it so much."

"S-Sorry..."

Ellis obediently relaxed and leaned tightly against him.

Kamito's heart raced in response.

"...L-Let me be clear, do not mistake me for some kind of immoral woman."

Ellis whispered softly with an ashamed expression.

"...A-Acting this way, i-is all the poison's fault."

"Yeah, I know."

To help relieve the pain and suffering from the poison, Kamito tightened his arm around Ellis' waist.

"Ah... H-Harder, a little more..."

"L-Like this?"

"J-Just a bit more... Ooh, smooch♪"

"...!?"

At this moment, Kamito felt a sense of numbing sweetness rush into his brain.

Ellis had begun to nibble Kamito's neck.

"Mmm, hmm... Smooch♪"

"E-Ellis, this... is too...!"

Maintaining his posture of embracing Ellis, Kamito squirmed.

(...Please, my sanity, you must endure!)

Kamito closed his eyes and screamed in his mind.

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(...I-I'm saved. My sanity is mere inches from the limit.)

--After that, several minutes had passed.

Ellis was now sound asleep on Kamito's lap as he listened to her calm breathing noises.

It seemed like the aphrodisiac's effects had ended.

Because sleeping in wet clothes would result in catching a cold, she was now in her underwear with Kamito's jacket draped over her.

Despite the immense difficulties faced when taking her clothes off just as she was falling asleep, Kamito channeled the superhuman self-control he had developed through the «Instructional School»'s training and managed to complete the task without distraction.

...That said, he did stare once or twice at the impressive contours of her cleavage.

In any case, she should recover her strength after some rest.

Placing a fire spirit crystal on the ground to give off warmth, Kamito suppressed a yawn.

The sun had just set outside, causing the interior of these ruins to become rather dim.

(...We'll have to spend the night in this place.)

As much as he wished to meet up with the rest of the team as quickly as possible, Ellis' current condition did not allow for reckless action.

"Mmm, Kamito, I will make you into a ham sandwich..."

On his lap, Ellis talked in her dreams.

"O-Of course, you are the ham, I-I am the bread, okay..."

"What on earth is she dreaming about..."

Kamito shrugged wryly.

Ponytail untied, her innocent sleeping face was truly adorable.

(By the way...)

Kamito looked up and immersed himself into a different line of thought.

(I never expected even Lily would be roped into being their teammate...)

Number seven of the «Instructional School» -- "Venom" Lily Flame.

Not only was she accomplished in combat techniques, she was also top class in espionage ability in the facility.

When they were teamed up in the past, she was still a girl who spoke little. However, the impression she gave off just now was much different from back then.

--Ever since the «Instructional School»'s destruction, four years had passed.

(...In other words, I'm not the only one who changed.)

Kamito had heard that basically all the orphans from the facility had obtained protection from the Knights of Ordesia. However, amongst those that were already executing missions, the so-called «Ranked Ones», there were apparently a few whose whereabouts were unknown.

«Team Inferno»'s commander -- the masked elementalist who stole Ren Ashbell's name, where and how did she come into contact with the lost children of the «Instructional School»?

--Kamito."

"Hmm?"

Suddenly hearing his name called out, Kamito turned to look.

Dressed in her uniform, Est was approaching from a dark corner.

"Est, are you okay now?"

"Yes. Although I still need rest in order to fulfill my duties as a sword."

Depleted in power by the contamination of «Forsaken Spirits», Est had apparently recovered enough to maintain human form.

Est walked quickly over and sat down lightly beside Kamito.

Her mysterious violet eyes kept staring at Kamito.

"Kamito, I am hungry."

"Yeah, it's already that time of the day."

Spirits normally did not need to eat but there were many high level spirits who treated human food as a kind of hobby they indulged in. Especially Est. Because she required three square meals a day at the Academy when together with Kamito, it did cause him some grief as he agonized over the increase in the food budget.

"Speaking of dinner, all we have is this sort of thing..."

Taking care not to wake up Ellis on his lap, Kamito took out from his uniform pocket a pill the size of a pea.

This was a drug regarded as a treasure amongst portable food for elementalists.

It was prepared from dozens of herbs and flavored with sugar and honey.

Filling, easy to digest and highly nutritious, it was known as a masterpiece.

"..."

"...Uh, Est?"

"Kamito, you don't have any food?"

Est inquired with innocent eyes.

"...I'm sorry. Right now there's only this."

...Feeling inexplicably guilty, Kamito apologized.

Due to the matter of weight, all conventional food and cooking equipment were stored in «Fenrir»'s belly. Before meeting up with Rinslet, they had no choice but to endure.

"...I understand, Kamito."

Est nodded obediently.

"I'm really sorry. When we return to «Ragna Ys», feel free to eat your favorites as much as you want."

"Yes."

Est nodded again, then said:

"Then Kamito, please feed me that snack."

Like a baby bird waiting to be fed, she opened her little mouth.

"..."

Currently, the legendary «Demon Slayer» was making an "Ah--" posture with her mouth open.

...How should one put it? It was cuteness overload.

Kamito coughed and surveyed the surroundings.

"...Yeah, say ah--"

Holding the pill in his fingers, he delivered it to Est's mouth.

Bite... Chew chew.

Expressionlessly, Est slightly dilated her pupils.

"...This is quite tasty."

"Really? Good to know you like it."

Seeing her offer unexpected praise, Kamito breathed a sigh of relief.

Seeing Est looking like that--

"By the way, Est--"

Kamito suddenly thought of something and asked.

"...?"

"Just now, when we were being attacked by those swarms of «Forsaken Spirits», you were trying to say something. Yeah, just before you changed into a sword, Est--"

'...Tsk, these guys are not targeting me but Est!?'

'Apparently so, Kamito. Very likely, I--'

...There had been an exchange like that.

"What were you talking about back then?"

Hence Est nodded.

"Yes. Back then, the reason the «Forsaken Spirits» attacked was most likely because I am a «Spirit Weapon» -- that was what I wanted to say."

"...A spirit weapon?"

...An unfamiliar term.

(No wait, I remember from the lectures at the Academy...)

Kamito tried hard to recall his supplementary lessons with his teacher Freya.

(...Right. I remember it was an umbrella term for powerful spirits mobilized during the «Spirit War».)

"Est, is it that kind of «Spirit Weapon»?"

"Yes. That is what fragments of my memory tell me."

Est nodded again.

The reason why she acted so ambiguously was because the current Est merely inherited the memories of the true «Terminus Est» as fragmented knowledge.

"I do not know whether I belonged to the side of the «Elemental Lords» or the rebels. However, I am sure my past self exterminated large numbers of spirits in this abandoned city."

Est murmured with her usual ice-cold expressionless demeanor.

...No emotions could be read from that kind of face.

"Those ghosts should all have been famous spirits before they fell to such depravity. However, they are now beings without sanity, relying on hatred to exist--"

"..."

Come to think of it, after leaving the central area of the abandoned city, Kamito no longer saw any signs of «Forsaken Spirits».

Considering that those things were ghosts bound to the land, perhaps their appearance depended on the location. Or maybe, they did not attack right now because Est's current output of divine power was relatively weak.

Est closed her violet eyes--

"Kamito, I will enter a dormant state to prepare for the next battle. Please rouse me if anything happens."

"...Yeah."

Dissipating into particles of light in the air, she returned to sword form once more.

Kamito swiftly reached out with his hand towards the sacred sword fallen on the ground -- At this moment.

"Mmm, hmm..."

Ellis stirred slightly on his lap.

"Ellis, you woke up?"

"Mmm, I already woke up back when you were feeding Est."

"...Y-You saw it all!?"

"I-I could not possibly get up during such an embarrassing situation!"

For some reason, Ellis began to sulk and pout.

"But wait, weren't the things you did earlier even more embarrassing, Ellis?"

"...~S-Speak of it no more!"

Thud thud thud thud.

Ellis sprang up and tearfully hammered her fists against Kamito's shoulder.

...Oh well, it's good to see her energy recovered.

"Okay, go and sleep a little longer. You still have a bit of fever."

"A-All your fault..."

Ellis instantly blushed, but had no choice but to lie down again with Kamito's jacket draped over her shoulders.

Watching this pure and innocent maiden of a knight, Kamito smiled wryly--

At this time, his gaze rested on his leather gloved left hand.

(By the way, what was with that pain earlier...)

Currently, there was no reaction at all from the «Spirit Seal» on his left hand.

(...Did something happen to Restia?)

--A long night was just beginning.

◇

--Meanwhile.

In a dark underground maze that stretched to who knows where, a young lady was walking with a white wolf.

"Sniff sniff, I can't find my way to the surface..."

Rinslet's eyes were full of tears.

...After the «Leap» took her to this underground maze, she had been spending hours walking in circles in the same place.

As if trying to encourage its master, Fenrir licked her hand.

Rinslet rubbed the white wolf's head as she illuminated the surroundings with a spirit crystal.

"By the way, where on earth is this place?"

The faint light shone on the stone wall.

Its surface was carved with spirit language script. Given enough time, Rinslet had sufficient knowledge to decipher them but her current priority was getting back out onto the surface.

...Rumble, her stomach growled.

Sighing lightly, Rinslet sat down on the floor.

"So tired. My feet hurt. I'm hungry too."

In any case, she had already walked for several hours.

Even though she was a trained elementalist, her stamina was reaching a limit.

Fenrir caressed its master's feet with its furry tail.

Using ice-cold air, Fenrir soothed the pain in Rinslet's red and swollen feet.

"Let's rest here. Walking around randomly isn't the best choice."

Shrugging, Rinslet leaned her back against the wall.

--Fenrir, take out the luggage."

Fenrir opened its jaws with a roar and spat out the luggage bag.

The demon ice spirit's stomach was connected to an alternate dimension.

"I originally hoped to make this for Kamito-san..."

Readyng chilled eggs and a bottle of milk, she used her familiar frying pan to make splendid pancakes with a «Fire» spirit crystal placed on the ground.

Then she laid out napkins on the floor and prepared teaware.

Always maintaining the composure to enjoy a good cup of tea under any circumstance -- this could be considered one of the Laurenfrost family's precepts.

...Several minutes later, the fragrance of tea wafted through the dark underground maze.

"...Phew."

Finishing her after-meal tea, Rinslet breathed out a sigh.

Beside her, Fenrir remained in proper sitting posture, having already finished eating the pancakes.

"...Somehow it doesn't taste too delicious when eaten alone."

...Then she sighed again.

Her past self never considered matters of this sort before--

Only recently did she come to realize the joys of having meals together with teammates.

...Furthermore, cooking for Kamito was also a joy.

"Oooh..."

As soon as she recalled his face, she could not help but smile.

"Woof?"

The surprised demon ice spirit tilted its head in puzzlement.

Seeing that, Rinslet coughed lightly.

"N-No, it's not like I'm thinking about Kamito-san!"

Frantically, she shook her head.

"...Eh?"

At this moment, Rinslet's gaze stopped upon a certain location on the stone wall.

On it was one of those carvings in spirit language that one could find all over the maze.

--There, she found a familiar name.

"...Terminus Est? Ah, that's Est-san's name!"

Frowning slightly, Rinslet brought the glowing spirit crystal closer to the stone wall.

Even though the words on the stone wall differed from contemporary script, it was still readable.

Were it written in «High Ancient» that was taught only to high ranking princess maidens, it would have been a completely different matter. But this degree of difficulty was still within Rinslet's ability to manage.

"Fenrir, take out the spirit language dictionary."

Fenrir opened its jaws wide and instantly spat out a dictionary. Spirit language dictionaries were essential for analyzing the spirit magic and barriers of enemy teams.

Flipping through the dictionary, Rinslet deciphered the words on the stone wall.

"Tiamat, Jormungandr... And also, Valaraukar. All the ones recorded here seem to be very famous spirits."

Anyone who had attended lectures in spirit studies at the Academy would find the names of these spirits familiar.

Next, Rinslet's finger stopped at a certain spot.

She found a name on the stone wall that intrigued her.

"Scarlet Valkyrie... That's quite similar to the name of Claire's hell cat spirit."

The inscription of the true name was in «High Ancient» and therefore undecipherable to Rinslet. But given that Scarlet was the renowned contracted spirit belonging to the Elstein family, it was not inconceivable for its name to be inscribed here--

--Carved on there are the names of ancient war princesses who once exhibited splendorous might here."

Suddenly, a girl's voice was heard.

"...Who approaches!?"

Rinslet swiftly released her «Elemental Waffe» and aimed towards the darkness.

...No one's presence could be sensed. If the other person was an elementalist, she was definitely quite accomplished.

Is it an elementalist from the «Sacred Spirit Knights» or the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor»--?

"Please show yourself. I, Rinslet the Ice Demon, shall be your opponent."

Readyng an ice arrow, Rinslet declared with awe-inspiring sternness.

--Wait. I am not an enemy."

Out from the darkness appeared--

A girl in a mysterious princess maiden outfit with hair like a watery mirror.

Her bangs were cut to uniform length. With eyes resembling the surfaces of lakes, she gazed at Rinslet.

Based on her rather petite stature, her age was probably about the same as Rinslet's little sister Mireille.

"...?"

Rinslet tilted her head in puzzlement.

Was there any girl this young amongst the participants of the «Blade Dance»?

...Though given the precedent of the imperial princess Linfa of the «Four Gods», it was impossible to be certain.

(...However, this uniform does not belong to any of the participating countries.)

Rinslet pondered in amazement with her brow furrowed.

"That..."

At this moment, the young princess maiden pointed near Rinslet's feet.

"That?"

"...That, I wanna eat."

"Huh?"

Lying by Rinslet's feet was the frying pan used for preparing pancakes just earlier.



--Enshrouded by the dark night.

Two girls dressed in the Theocracy's uniforms were stepping into some ruins.

"Say, will we really be able to meet Onii-sama here?"

"Yes. Although they have already left, with one teammate suffering from poison, they shouldn't have gone very far off from here."

Lily Flame nodded as she answered the gray-haired girl's question.

These were the same ruins where she had battled Ellis earlier.

There were still several large holes dug out by the demon tree spirit in the ground.

"Hmph, nearby eh--"

Muir Alenstarl lightly jumped off a collapsed wall of stone.

"Then let me turn this area into a wasteland, then he'll be found."

"Muir!"

Lily reflexively shouted to stop her.

If she used the militarized spirit «Valaraukar» provided by the Theocracy, indeed, the entire vicinity could be turned into a smoking and smoldering wasteland.

However.

(...That spirit is far too dangerous.)

Muir had already fought an elementalist from the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor», defeating her.

The pillar of fire in the city center observed earlier was precisely the flames of spirit magic released by «Valaraukar» during the battle.

This level of destructive power even surpassed the annihilation spirit «Tiamat» that Kamito had defeated in the past.

However, «Valaraukar» had a major shortcoming -- or rather, flaw.

The astounding power released by the spirit would attract «Forsaken Spirits» from the area.

Ghosts appearing from all over the abandoned city rushed forth and attacked recklessly as if attracted by «Valaraukar», perishing in the crimson flames.

After that, «Valaraukar» began to get confused as if possessed by ghosts, on the verge of running totally amok.

Although it was still unclear why exactly the ghosts swarmed «Valaraukar» --

(Hypothetically, what if the Theocracy's «Snake» provided that spirit because they knew this would happen?)

Most suspicious of all, why would the Theocracy's military, which had refused to provide any additional militarized spirits, suddenly reverse their rigid stance to prepare such a powerful spirit -- ?

It was not difficult to realize there must be ulterior motives.

"Muir, postpone the battle with Kamito for now. Let's meet up with Cardinal first."

"Don't wanna. Muir can't wait to use this new toy to play with Onii-sama."

"Muir!"

"What? Are you ordering me?"

Instantly. Woosh -- Lily felt an intense chill down her spine.

Those eyes, evocative of bottomless lakes, pierced right through her.

"...!?"

Trembling in fear of a mere fourteen-year-old girl. This was no joking matter.

Muir Alenstarl was the «Monster» born from the «Instructional School». She probably would not show any mercy towards anyone who defied her will, not even a companion who had accompanied her for years.

Muir was completely uninterested in obtaining victory in the «Blade Dance».

Neither did she possess any «Wish» she wanted realized.

This petite «Monster» only sought the momentary thrill of destruction.

The only exception was Kazehaya Kamito.

The reason for Muir's obsession with Kamito was unknown.

Only that dating back to their days at the facility together, she adored Kamito as her elder brother with blind devotion.

--No matter what, there was no stopping this «Monster».

"Wait for me, Onii-sama, I'm coming to pick you up."

"Muir, stop--!"

The mithril bracelet gave off intense light--

"Show yourself, creature of destruction, trailblazer of those who lament the darkness -- «Valaraukar»!"

The gigantic demon of flame was summoned to the abandoned city.



--Boom!

Crimson flames danced wildly as they swept across the land, devouring the «Red Dragon»'s massive body.

With a massive roar that reached the skies, the red dragon soon disappeared in the burning flames.

This was the red dragon spirit «Lindwurm», possessing high resistance against flame type magic.

Even so, its gigantic body was instantly burnt into charcoal.

"...Is this as far as I can go...?"

The girl dressed in the Dracunia military uniform -- the second-in-command of the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor», Yuri El Cid, collapsed on her knees as she stared beyond the blazing flames.

The air shimmered from the heat.

In that direction, the scarlet masked girl approached on foot.

Commander of «Team Inferno» -- Ren Ashbell.

"...Leonora-sama, I am truly sorry. But--"

Yuri panted heavily in her hazy consciousness.

"Upon the honor of Dracunia's great name, I swear I shall not return emptyhanded--!"

Pouring in the last of her power, Yuri chanted high level dragon magic.

Gripped tight in her right hand was the «Dragon's Jaw» formed from a vortex of flames.

--By these dragon flames of mine, vengeance shall be exacted upon Ren Ashbell, the «Strongest Blade Dancer»!"

Devoting her entire body and mind to this strike, Yuri began to charge.

This was the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor»'s traditional charging tactic, as well as Yuri's most prided technique. Even if she could not currently use her «Elemental Waffe», a direct hit should still inflict damage--

However.

"--These flames of yours are merely inferior knockoffs."

Ren Ashbell lightly raised her hand and lit a fire on her fingertip.

"To honor your courage in daring to challenge me singlehandedly, I shall bid you farewell with the «Flames of Elstein»."

Using the fire at her fingertip, she traced out a magic circle in the air.

"Not even time can escape a frozen fate, conflagrating flames of absolute zero -- «Frost Blaze»!"

"...!"

The instant the dancing blue flames made contact with Yuri El Cid's arm--

The «Dragon's Jaw» shattered into tiny particles as if it were frozen and brittle.

"How could this be possible... I don't believe it, flames that freeze other flames--!"

--That sort of thing absolutely did not exist in this world.

This was an unknown power that transcended the laws and precepts of «Astral Zero».

"...Ren Ashbell... You, really..."

Having exhausted the last of her strength, the dragon knight collapsed on the spot.

"..."

Ren Ashbell took away Yuri's «Magic Stone» and turned her gaze towards the evening sky.

The sun had already descended and the cold moon was rising.

"--The moon eh? Perfect for the «Demon King»'s revival."

Her crimson overcoat fluttering, she gradually disappeared into the abandoned city beneath the evening sky.

These freezing flames, one day they shall consume the entirety of my body.

--Before that happens, I must end everything.

Chapter Six

Scarlet Valkyrie

Amidst endless darkness, even blacker than night--

The demon sword of darkness gradually regained consciousness.

Here was a mental realm completely isolated from the outside world.

Prohibiting movement, this place only allowed the existence of consciousness.

Currently, the «Demon Sword» that stood as her temporary state was being carried by the hell cat girl.

--How ironic. To think I would be saved by a rival whom I once tried to kill."

In the darkness, Restia sighed softly.

The damage inflicted by the «Divine Armament» would not recover immediately. Due to the effects of the strong geis, there was also no way to return to her main body.

As much as she disliked it, for the time being she had no choice but to remain in the form of the demon sword.

Drawing her knees up to her chest, Restia surveyed the darkness enshrouding her surroundings.

A pitch black darkness surged forth, restless.

This was not the darkness of the night which calmed her heart.

Instead, this was some otherworldly substance possessing astounding will.

Absolutely something that should not exist in this world.

Furthermore, it was three years ago, just when *he* was about to realize the «Wish» -- That darkness devoured her.

People had no idea, but the so-called miracle of the «Elemental Lords» that could reputedly grant all «Wishes», its true form was this astounding darkness--

"Over these past few days, the rate of corrosion has increased greatly -- There's not much time left."

Restia showed anxiety on her face.

"Next, I shall become the «Enemy of the World»."

Dark light lit up in her dusk-colored eyes.

(...Kamito, even if it would cause you to resent me, hate me.)

Even

What Restia recalled in her mind was the promise he had made in his youth.

Should there ever come a time in the future when I have changed so much I am myself no longer--

--Kill me.



"...?"

Hiding in the ruins, Claire turned her head towards the demon sword of darkness resting against the wall.

The demon sword, which had remained silent all this time, seemed to be murmuring something.

(...Was it an illusion?)

...However, the demon sword remained silent.

The sharp blade of darkness shone with ominous luster as it reflected the moonlight.

Earlier, Restia was heavily injured by the divine armament that pierced her in the chest. Even for a high-level spirit like her, recovery would take quite a long period of time.

(--That knight hasn't caught up yet.)

Leaning against a wall in the ruins, Claire searched the area for presences.

It was inconceivable that Luminaris would give up so easily--

At this moment, Claire felt a powerful presence up in the air, causing her to tremble intensely.

"That's...!"

In the evening sky, a gigantic spirit resembling a multi-headed dragon was flying.

(Demon spirit...)

During the daytime, no spirits could be sensed other than those ghosts in this abandoned city.

But as soon as the sun went down, it was as if the city changed completely.

It became a literal «City of Demons» with violent and ferocious demon spirits roaming the skies.

Futhermore, the spirit flying overhead belonged to the highest rank, categorized as «Archdemon Class» by the Spirit Knights of the Empire. An existence that none of the elite «Blade Dance» participants from various countries could possibly handle alone.

If one were to attempt slaying it, most likely an entire division of elite spirit knights would be required at least.

However, Kamito had apparently defeated an «Archdemon Class» spirit singlehandedly before.

(...Probably some kind of joke. How could a single person defeat something like that?)

Claire looked up in trepidation at the demon spirit flying in the night sky.

Of course, from the demon spirit's perspective, beings like Claire were completely insignificant. So long as she did not attack first, it probably would not assault her--

"Meow..."

Scarlet also seemed to have sensed the danger and had humbly curled into a ball.

After some time, the gigantic demon spirit leisurely flew into the distance.

"...It's gone."

Seeing that, Claire breathed a sigh of relief.

...As soon as she relaxed, a rumbling informed her of the hungry stomach.

Speaking of which, she still had not eaten yet.

Claire took out the little pill from her pocket and placed it in her mouth. Seeing Scarlet wagging its tail as if it wanted one too, she gave the cat a pill as well.

(...What a tasteless meal.)

However, Claire was used to such lonely meals. Before she met Kamito, she spent her days alone in the Academy residence, subsisting on canned food.

--Completely different from several years ago.

Although the Elstein family's dining table was not as luxurious as other great nobles, they did have exclusive chefs in the city who could provide hot meals on demand.

Also, whenever large scale festivities were being held in their territory, their subjects would prepare and bring all sorts of prided specialties of local cuisine.

(...The «Fire Spirit Festival» once a year, how nostalgic.)

Stroking Scarlet's head gently, Claire muttered in her heart.

Even now, Claire could still vividly recall the figure of her elder sister in glamorous ritual attire as she danced in offering during the festivals back then.

--It was a memory of her happy everyday life that had vanished like a dream.

At this moment.

"...!?"

Sensing the presence that suddenly appeared, Claire went into high alert.

With her left hand, she grabbed the demon sword of darkness that was leaning against the wall.

"...Who is it!?"

A wild animal's low cry responded to her sharp question.

(...A wolf?)

This word entered her mind momentarily but she instantly rejected the notion.

Wild animals could not possibly appear in this abandoned city.

If they did, they must be--

--Scarlet!"

Claire swiftly chanted spirit language to release her «Elemental Waffe».

The burning flames lit the dim surroundings.

"...!?"

Appearing out of the darkness was a pack of black hunting hounds.

Five... Or was it six? --Their outlines flickered nonstop as if melding into the surrounding darkness.

"...Why? I couldn't sense any elementalist just now."

As if responding to Claire's murmurings, a voice answered:

"My legion spirit «Shadewolf» possesses skills in tracking and presence concealment. Ordinary methods cannot detect us."

A girl approached from the entrance of the ruins.

Glaring sharply, this girl had hair that was cut short like a boy's.

--Special Operative of the «Sacred Spirit Knights», Ayla Cedar."

The girl bowed politely then snapped her fingers.

Hearing the sound, the wolf pack began to make intimidating howls as they encircled Claire.

"That demon sword, hand it over."

"I'm sorry, I cannot comply."

Claire struck the floor with Flametongue to deter the wolves.

(...A special operative, in other words, an expert tracker. What a troublesome opponent.)

The wolves were very likely the minions of the shadow spirit.

Despite the name of the «Sacred Spirit Knights», it did not imply that all members employed spirits with the holy attribute.

After all, an unbalanced team composition of that sort would be unlikely to win the current «Blade Dance» with its team format and regulations.

Shadow spirits possessed excellent skills in presence hiding.

Although the flame spirit «Scarlet» was stronger in pure offensive power, Claire could not afford to be careless because shadow elementalists were skilled in special blade dances.

"Go forth and capture, «Shadewolf»!"

Heeding the calls of Ayla Cedar, the shadow wolves attacked one after another.

Claire swung her whip to trace out a column of fire in an arc.

--However, the enemy anticipated her move. The wolves instantly melted into the shadows on ground and dove into gaps in the rubble to get around the wall of flame.

"...Tsk, take this -- !?"

Faced with a pouncing wolf, Claire incinerated it at the last second using her whip.

An endlessly criss-crossing mad storm of whip strikes made it impossible for the wolf pack to approach.

"As befits one hailing from the renowned lineage of flame priestesses--"

"After all, I'm used to training animals!"

"I hope you will refrain from throwing insults, Claire Rouge!"

Ayla Cedar snapped her fingers again.

The shadow wolves divided and increased their numbers.

(...With this many, I'm not going to be able to handle them!?)

Instantly, the tides turned on Claire.

There was no end to things when dealing with legion spirits as enemies.

"Go forth and devour, scorching ball of conflagration -- «Fireball»!"

Releasing spirit magic from her palm, Claire blew away the shadow spirit.

The shadow wolves dispersed like mist but they were not defeated by the attack just now.

Legion spirits which relied on numbers for victory were rather tricky to deal with. In that case--

(--I'll just attack the elementalist directly!)

Claire kicked the ground to accelerate and closed in instantly.

Due to the nature of their duties, special operatives tended not to be skilled in close combat using «Elemental Waffen».

The wolves that had escaped the earlier explosion now bared their fangs and claws as they gave chase, however--

"Too late!"

Claire brandished Flametongue as she ran, establishing a barrier around her.

Using a whip in a one-against-many blade dance was precisely Claire's forte.

Within the blink of an eye, Claire had closed in before Ayla, then--

--Turn in charcoal!"

Mercilessly, she swung down the fiery whip.

A whip strike with god-like speed, so fast that there was no trail of its trajectory.

During practice, the only one capable of dodging this move was Kamito.

Ayla Cedar was just about to be devoured by the crimson flames -- However.

"I am the shadow that moves in time -- «Shade Leap»."

Her figure disappeared from before Claire like an afterimage.

(Transfer type spirit magic...!)

Claire's mind began to turn rapidly.

(I remember amongst spirit magic with the shadow attribute, «Transfer» type magic--)

Having learned at the Academy about the basic magic systems of all the major attributes, Claire had them all memorized with certainty.

The title of the «Problematic Honors Student» was not simply for show.

(...It is supposed to be a magic system with many flaws that make it hard to control.)

Ayla's figure vanished completely.

Instantly, Claire jumped away from her position.

(«Shade Leap» -- its effect is the transfer between shadows that are closest together...!)

Beneath Claire's feet, her shadow was shaking unnaturally.

But having seen through her opponent's attack, Claire had already prepared countermeasures.

"O Flame, dance a magnificent rondo -- «Fire Burst»!"

She chanted spirit magic at high speed in midair.

Countless glowing spheres of heat appeared from her palms and banished the surrounding darkness with dazzling light.

Unlike the «Fireball», this move lacked damage but could shock and awe the enemy through powerful light and noise.

The white flash instantly cleared the ground of shadows, cancelling the «Shade Leap» magic.

Suffering the backlash of the cancelled magic, Ayla was ejected onto the ground.

Landing nimbly, Claire instantly attacked with Flametongue.

"Yah!"

The special operative was enveloped in fire and sent crashing into the floor.

With a cracking sound of air, Claire pulled Flametongue back into her hands.

--Victory has been decided."

Just as she was about to inflict a decisive blow--

"...!?"

She found her foot sinking into a shadow on the ground as she took a step forward.

"...This is an «Isolation Barrier»!?"

Claire exclaimed in surprise.

Before Ayla started the fight, she must have set a trap in the surroundings--!

"...How careless, hell cat user. After all, special operatives are most adept at relying on traps to fight."

Lying on the ground, Ayla smiled.

However, even with one foot swallowed by shadows, Claire remained calm and composed.

"Relying on a barrier of this level, do you really think you can catch me?"

The victor of the blade dance was already decided.

Struck by a direct hit from Flametongue, Ayla was incapacitated from fighting within the near future.

Unless the ensnarement occurred during battle, otherwise this type of «Isolation Barrier», which only took mere minutes to dispel, was virtually meaningless.

"No, I have already achieved my goal."

"What?"

"Because my goal was to keep you pinned down in this location."

"...!"

Claire clicked her tongue as she realized her own stupidity.

(...Her comrades are nearby?)

On further thought, it was only natural.

Otherwise, this girl would not have come to challenge her one on one.

--In that case, it was imperative to escape from here as quickly as possible.

Claire lit a fire with her finger and traced out a magic circle in the air for dispelling the barrier.

'--This method will not be anywhere quick enough, you know. Claire Rouge.'

"...!?"

Claire suddenly looked down.

The exasperated voice came from the demon sword held in her left hand.

"...You recovered your energy?"

'Only a bare minimum, enough to transmit my thoughts. Still not enough to resume human form... That aside, use me to pierce that shadow. Your spirit magic takes too long.'

"Eh?"

'Do it quickly. The Paladin is hastening to this place.'

"...I-I got it."

Claire frantically nodded and used the demon sword's blade to stab the shadow.

Instantly with an ear-splitting metallic clang, the «Isolation Barrier» ensnaring Claire's foot was easily broken.

"How could this happen!?"

Ayla exclaimed with surprise.

(What power...!)

Claire could not help but gasp.

Simply within an instant, a barrier that would occupy an experienced elementalist quite some time was dispelled--

--*Well then, hurry and leave this place.'*

"W-Why are you giving me orders!?"

Despite retorting back, Claire was already preparing to flee the scene. However.

"Do you really think I would let the same prey escape twice?"

"...!?"

On the other end of the dim passage came a solemn voice.

"Well done, Ayla. Please rest there for a while."

As her military boots sounded with every step she took, Luminaris Saint Leished approached.

Then from the opposite end of the alleyway came another person--

"I'll shoot you full of holes if you dare move."

Wielding a silver longbow, yet another girl of the «Sacred Spirit Knights».

(...This is bad.)

The two knights were closing in on Claire with a pincer formation.

Her escape routes were completely sealed off.

(...This is hopeless. Nothing I can do but fight?)

Paying attention to the archer behind her, Claire readied Flametongue.

The one before her was the runner-up from the previous Blade Dance who had fought and lost to Ren Ashbell.

Although Claire had no idea how well she could fight against an ace-level elementalist--

--She could not allow herself to be defeated here.

Claire had a «Wish» she must realize no matter what.

Also--

(All this time, Kamito has protected me many times.)

She gripped the demon sword of darkness in her hand tightly.

Holding the contracted spirit from Kamito's past, the darkness spirit girl.

(...Therefore, I shall in turn protect what's precious to Kamito!)

Reacting to the divine power she released, Flametongue's flames intensified instantly.

The flames were so astounding that even Luminaris displayed wariness and halted her advance.

"Claire Rouge. Why are you going to so far in protecting that darkness spirit?"

"...None of your business."

--Is it because the demon sword belongs to the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell?"

"Like I said, none of your -- Eh?"

Claire's jaw dropped in surprise.

For an instant, she could not comprehend what Luminaris had said.

"...Just now, what did you say?"

"...? Could it be, you didn't know?"

This time it was Luminaris who displayed an expression of surprise.

Next--

"Then I shall tell you. The darkness spirit over there is the elemental waffe -- the «Vorpal Sword»."

An unbelievable statement was announced.

--Namely, the sword used by the strongest blade dancer during the «Blade Dance» three years ago."



...After several seconds of silence.

"...Eh?"

Claire uttered a weak powerless sound.

"What do you mean...?"

"Exactly as the words say. The demon sword you are holding right now in your hand is the contracted spirit of the «Strongest Blade Dancer». The elemental waffe -- «Vorpal Sword»."

Luminaris repeated the same content.

"...!"

Claire instantly opened her eyes wide and her gaze fell upon the demon sword in her hand.

...Luminaris did not appear to be lying or providing misdirection. Furthermore, this rigid Paladin did not seem like the type to care for word games.

However.

"...H-How did you find that out!?"

Claire questioned to corroborate.

...Indeed, the sword's appearance was extremely similar.

But despite the similarity -- it was not entirely the same.

The appearance of the elemental waffe used by Ren Ashbell whom Claire had always idolized and revered remained vividly in Claire's memories to this day.

...Claire could not possibly make a mistake in recognition.

«Elemental Waffe» were existences that materialized the user's psyche. Hence it was understandable for Kamito and Ren Ashbell -- two people whose sword skills originated from the same master -- to have similarities.

However, Luminaris quietly shook her head.

"...I know without a doubt. After all, I fought directly against that demon sword three years ago."

"..."

Claire closed her mouth.

--Indeed, Luminaris had engaged the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell, in blade dance during the finals three years ago.

As an elementalist of the highest class, discerning the true nature of elemental waffen she had faced directly in combat before should not be a difficult task.

Since she had determined this demon sword to be the «Vorpal Sword», it was equivalent to saying -- it was fact beyond a doubt.

The darkness spirit Restia was Kamito's contracted spirit in the past.

At the same time, Restia is the demon sword of the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell's -- «Vorpal Sword».

From this, one could conclude--

(In that case, Kamito really is...?)

Claire felt her breathing quicken and her heart beginning to race.

All along, Claire had suspected Kamito's true identity many times.

When Kamito used the same sword style as «Her», Claire had even sought Ellis' aid to investigate the truth.

However, no matter how much she suspected, some part of her mind remained in denial.

Three years ago, the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell, had appeared out of nowhere like a comet.

Through her overwhelmingly powerful and magnificent blade dance, she became the "maiden" idolized by all princess maidens across the entire continent.

The one whom Claire had idolized from childhood and regarded as her goal--

--Turned out to be right by her side all this time.

"That darkness spirit is taking part in the current festival as a member of «Team Inferno». With that, it should be an elementary exercise to speculate that she is Ren Ashbell's demon sword, right?"

Luminaris continued to display a surprised expression.

She looked like she was not aware of Restia being Kamito's contracted spirit, and she even believed firmly that the commander of «Team Inferno» was the real Ren Ashbell.

Claire's gaze stopped on the demon sword of darkness in her hand.

"...Is that really true?"

She asked.

But the demon sword did not reply.

Whether this was intentional or because she simply exhausted her power to dispel the «Barrier», Claire was not sure--

"..."

Claire felt her throat dry up. Her mind was in turmoil.

...The truth has yet to be confirmed.

She could not be sure that Luminaris' words were the truth.

However--

(The fact that Kamito is Ren Ashbell, the «Strongest Blade Dancer»...)

...There was no feeling of being deceived.

Because Kamito's wish to keep it a secret was understandable. Furthermore, the trusting relationship they had built up over their days together was not so shallow as to waver so easily on a discovery like this.

"...~I, how shall I face Kamito from now on?"

Claire felt her cheeks heat up instantly.

...She had yet to settle her emotions.

Even though it was not the time to waver before a formidable enemy--

--In any case!"

Luminaris closed in further at this time.

"Hand the demon sword over. It is an existence that will one day become the «Enemy of the World»."

"...!"

Claire brought her awareness back to the enemy at hand and readied Flametongue.

Now was not the time to think too much. Kamito's true identity can be pondered later.

(This is Kamito's sword and his precious contracted spirit. Therefore--)

Feigning ignorance as she swept away the penetrating ache in her heart--

Claire voiced out her determination.

"I have no reason to hand it over to you!"

The burning Flametongue slashed across the night sky.



Both Luminaris in front of Claire and the knight in the back took action simultaneously.

Ignoring the archer behind her, Claire faced Luminaris.

(The rule of one-against-many engagements is that the first strike must eliminate the greatest threat...!)

Chanting a spirit language incantation--

"Go forth and dance, the crimson flames summoning destruction -- «Hell Blaze»!"

In the forward direction, Claire released the strongest spirit magic with the fire attribute.

This astounding heat wave, hot enough to melt rock, engulfed Luminaris.

(...Success! Once a direct hit--)

But in the next instant.

"...!"

The intensely burning flames were instantly extinguished.

What sliced through the flames -- was a flash of dazzling brilliance.

(That is...!)

Claire had seen the sword before.

Three years ago, Luminaris had used this elemental waffe on the stage of the «Blade Dance» finals.

"With brilliance that illuminates for eternity, the demon vanquishing sacred sword -- «Mungleis»!"

Luminaris called out the sacred sword's title sonorously.

The sword blade gave off blinding light, devouring the flames, the torrential light sliced through the dark night.

"Guh...!"

Faced with dazzling light, Claire could not help but narrow her eyes.

"Together with Her Majesty the Queen's sacred sword, «Durandal», they are known as the highest ranking elemental waffen. Don't delude yourself into thinking it could melt from flames of that level!"

Luminaris stabbed the sacred sword into the ground.

Instantly, the ground shattered as a sharp blade of light rushed forward in a straight line.

If Claire attempted to evade by jumping, she would probably become a target for a second slash.

--Block it, «Flame Wall»!"

Claire urgently chanted defensive magic.

Intending to reduce the power of the blade of light--

"Yah!"

But the blade of light easily sliced through the flame barrier and struck Claire's body directly. As physical damage instantly converted into psychological damage, her mind was shaken.

"...Guh, ooh.."

"Wow, one hit was not enough to take you down?"

Luminaris expressed mild surprise in her voice.

"

(...Damn it, so this is what it means to be an ace-level elementalist.)

Not just martial arts. The total volume of divine power at their disposal also differed substantially.

Despite releasing the spirit's power to such an extent, Luminaris remained completely composed.

"Claire Rouge, you are an excellent elementalist. However--"

Luminaris stopped in front of Claire who lay collapsed on the ground.

Then--

"You are still too inexperienced."

She stepped on the demon sword of darkness held firmly in Claire's hand.

Readyng «Mungleis» with both hands, Luminaris pointed her sword straight down.

"«Vorpal Sword» -- I originally hoped to defeat you in a proper blade dance."

"No, stop..."

Claire desperately moved her fingers as she panted.

The darkness spirit Restia -- she was precious to Kamito.

(I, must protect her...!)

Claire mustered all her strength, trying to pull back the darkness spirit who was stuck in demon sword form without any power.

"Please spare me the futile struggle. I have no wish to enact unnecessary violence."

However, Luminaris' military boot crushed Claire's left hand.

"...Ah, owww...!"

The blunt sound of bones shattering could be heard.

Claire suppressed the scream rising in the depths of her throat.

An overwhelming disparity in power. Despite the progress Claire had made during the current «Blade Dance», her difference in level compared to Luminaris was still massive.

At least, in a one-on-one blade dance, she had no hope of winning.

(...But clearly that «Ren Ashbell» is even more powerful than Luminaris.)

She recalled the scarlet-masked elementalist she faced off against in the forest.

During that time, even partnered with Rinslet, they could not even put up any meaningful resistance.

Suddenly.

(Right, back then...!)

Claire had a flash of inspiration.

The flames she displayed for Rinslet who was about to be killed.

(That Ren Ashbell imposter called it the «Flames of Elstein»...)

If I could once again release those "flames that incinerated other flames"--

"...Flames!"

Just like back then.

Claire imagined flames dancing madly and lit a fire in her right hand.

However--

(...No good, not this type of fire!)

These current flames were converted from one's own divine power using the contracted spirit as a medium.

Fundamentally different from those "flames that incinerated other flames."

"You still have strength to resist huh?"

Luminaris announced coldly, pointing the tip of her sacred sword at Claire's neck:

"However, it is futile. You shall be defeated and retired right here."

"...!"

In that instant.

"Luminaris-sama!"

The archer girl screamed shrilly.

Flametongue turned back into the hell cat and roared as it attacked Luminaris.

"Scarlet!"

"What a loyal and dutiful spirit."

Luminaris turned swiftly and swatted Scarlet away with one strike of the sacred sword.

Scarlet was instantly sent flying and crashed into the ground.

Even its desperate strike ended in failure.

(It's all over, is it...?)

Claire bit her lip hard.

Having exhausted the last of her strength, even maintaining her consciousness was difficult.

At this moment.

'--There's still a chance, you know.'

A whisper was heard in her mind.

(...Darkness spirit?)

Restia was talking directly to Claire's consciousness like earlier.

'Claire Rouge. Perhaps in your current state, you might be able to draw out «Her» original power that was sealed.'

(...By her you mean?)

In her mind, Claire questioned back with surprise.

'Please call out her true name. The «Spirit Weapon» once known as the bloodstained princess. The utmost treasure entrusted to the Elstein bloodline -- the «Scarlet Valkyrie».'

(Scarlet Valkyrie... Could it be that--)

Claire opened her eyes wide.

(You know Scarlet's true name?)

Come to think of it, that «Ren Ashbell» also mentioned this name before.

--The flame spirit serving the Elstein family, whose true name had been lost in the distant past.

'Claire Rouge, touch the body of my blade with the back of your hand. I shall transmit to your mind directly «Her» image. As reluctant as I am to awaken my enemy, there is no other choice now that things have progressed to this point.'

(...Eh?)

'Hurry!'

Hearing Restia urging her--

Claire steeled her determination and used the back of her right hand -- the «Fire Spirit Seal» to touch the tip of the sword.

She had no choice but to believe in the darkness spirit and take a gamble.

"...Guh, ahh..."

Accompanied by an acute sense of pain, an expanding torrent of images surged into her mind.

The crimson princess knight wielded a massive scythe as she faced armies of countless spirits in battle.

--The one who guided courageous warriors to the final battlefield.

--The one whom the flames of destruction obeyed, bestowing eternal demise upon foolish enemies.

'Her name is--'

Claire loudly called out the true name transmitted from the darkness spirit.

"Her name being, the «Scarlet Valkyrie» -- Ortlinde."

Instantly, crimson flames swallowed Scarlet's body.

"...What!?"

Luminaris exclaimed in alarm.

Next--

--You have finally called out my name, Master."

Out from amidst the wildly dancing flames, a girl appeared.

◇

The sight of the red-haired girl appearing out of the crimson flames--

Made Claire even forget the pain in her bleeding right hand--

"It's Scarlet...?"

Claire murmured in shock.

Within Claire's hazy and unsteady field of vision--

The girl stepped up to protect Claire, facing off against Luminaris.

A petite, graceful and slender figure.

Pristine pale complexion, clad in a dress of flames.

Emerging from her crimson hair that was redder than fire--

Triangular ears like a cat's.

"Yes, Master."

The pair of cat ears moved slightly.

The red-haired girl nodded as she stared at Luminaris before her.

"The «Scarlet Valkyrie» -- whose true name of old is «Ortlinde»."

"...!"

Instantly, the flames on the girl's body burned even more intensely.



Claire held her breath in the face of such flames that seemed as if though they were charring the night sky.

(Amazing...!)

In contrast to its cute appearance as a cat, Scarlet was already a powerful spirit.

However, the girl before Claire's eyes -- was an existence far surpassing norms.

"...Is that the flame spirit's true appearance?"

Luminaris groaned in her throat.

Her expression no longer displayed the same composure as before.

"Spirits bearing human form are known as the highest level spirits--"

Staring at Scarlet unerringly before her eyes, Luminaris held the sacred sword «Mungleis» with both hands.

"Luminaris-sama!"

At this moment.

An arrow of light shot at Scarlet from behind.

This was the doing of the other female knight lurking on the other end of the darkness.

She probably intended to launch a surprise attack from the direction opposite to Luminaris.

However.

--Too slow."

Scarlet created little fireballs in both hands.

The fireballs silently rotated around her, easily deflecting the incoming arrow.

"...Wha!"

"Over there--"

With a mere turn of her finger--

Suddenly, a fireball flew towards where the arrow was shot from--

In the next instant, an astounding explosion was heard as a pillar of fire emerged.

"...!"

Taking this as the signal for their fight to begin--

Wielding «Mungleis» in her hand, Luminaris stepped forward forcefully, instantly closing the distance.

--Master, please issue your orders."

A crisp voice with a touch of sternness was heard.

"...Please order the Scarlet Valkyrie -- «Ortlinde»!"

Gradually slipping towards unconsciousness, Claire cried out.

"Defeat the enemy!"

"Understood, Master."

Scarlet swiftly swung her arm towards the air.

With a burst of scattering fire, she summoned a massive crimson scythe in her hands.

Its ferocious appearance seemed as if it were forged out of the flames of hell directly.

Held in this adorable little girl's hands, it seemed extremely out of place.

--O Knight, thou art the one who prevaleth against the trials of fire!"

Luminaris chanted for protection against fire.

Producing slicing wind from the swings of her sword, she slashed apart the burning flames.

Scarlet leaped with agility, swinging the massive crimson scythe in midair.

With an ear-splitting sound of impact, sparks flew all around.

The shockwave from the clash caused rubble on the ground to fly.

This was a blade dance between a topnotch elementalist and a top-class flame spirit.

"Amazing..."

Seeing the blade dance being performed before her eyes, Claire could not help but exclaim in admiration.

Scarlet's movements far surpassed her speed in hell cat form.

Although they were well-matched in the initial clashes, the tides quickly turned against Luminaris who could not defeat the incoming flames.

"...So this is the power of a top-class spirit!?"

--Unforgivable. I cannot show mercy to you who have hurt Master."

Scarlet swung the massive crimson scythe, her slashes forming flames that began to burn.

The scorching flames she produced could not be defended against by mere defensive magic.

"...No matter what, I cannot lose in this kind of place!"

Despite the flames surrounding her, Luminaris continued to swing her sword.

"I must resume my duel with «Her» and bring victory back to my homeland--"

"Regrettably--"

Instantly, Scarlet's figure vanished.

Or rather, using the sacred sword's blade as a stepping platform, she jumped into the air at once.

"You will disappear here."

--The crimson crescent shone against the dark night.

An expression of despair was spreading from the blue eyes of the Paladin as she gazed upwards.

Next--

"O Flames, let a night of red descend upon the earth -- «Crimson Judgement»."

The dancing flames of conflagration devoured Luminaris.



In the dark underground maze, the aroma of pancakes spread through the air.

"...So very tasty."

The mysterious young princess maiden was enjoying the delicious pancakes.

Nibbling away in small bites, she looked extremely adorable.

"I can make as many as you want, so please eat to your heart's content."

"Thank you..."

The girl nodded happily.

(By the way...)

Rinslet suddenly inclined her head in puzzlement.

(...This child, who is she actually?)

...Her identity was a complete riddle. How should one put it? No humans were supposed to be present in a place like this except for participants in the «Blade Dance».

(Perhaps...)

Rinslet suddenly thought of one possibility.

"Like Est-san, she is a high-level spirit--"

Then her presence in «Astral Zero» could be explained.

"...?"

Her cheeks stuffed full of food, the girl looked in Rinslet's direction.

"...You, perhaps you are a spirit?"

"..."

The girl silently nodded.

...It looked like the speculation was correct.

Rinslet adjusted her sitting posture lightly.

This was the proper etiquette for a princess maiden towards a high-level spirit.

"Well, may I be so bold as to ask what your divine name may be?"

"..."

The girl averted her gaze... Clearly she did not want to answer this time.

"Well, may I ask why you have appeared in such a place?"

"..."

No answer either. --Just as Rinslet concluded that...

"...No idea."

The girl looked up and gave that answer.

"...No idea?"

"Can't remember."

Did she lose her memory?

But spirits were not supposed to lose their memory--

(...Wait a minute, there's also another case like that.)

Rinslet had heard that the sword spirit Est only retained portions of her memory because of the irregular contract she established with Kamito.

Perhaps this spirit who resembled a girl in outer appearance also lost her memory for some reason.

Otherwise--

(Could she be toying with me?)

Rinslet muttered in her mind.

"Just now, you said you knew the spirits whose names are carved on the stone wall, right?"

"..."

The spirit girl nodded.

"«Scarlet Valkyrie» -- Ortlinde. In the «Spirit War» several thousand years ago, she was the flame spirit revered and feared as the bloodstained princess."

"Why would you know something like that?"

Although Rinslet felt it was a little impertinent to question a high-level spirit like this...

"...When clearly you've lost your memory."

Rinslet still felt she had to add the last statement.

"I have been imprisoned in this underground maze all along. The only thing I could do to alleviate boredom was to decipher the voluminous history carved on the stone walls."

"Imprisoned?"

If this girl really was a spirit--

Physical imprisonment in a maze was not possible.

Probably through some kind of magical means, she was sealed here.

"So who did--"

Just at this moment.

"Yah!"

The ground shook intensely, causing debris to rain down noisily from the ceiling.

Shielding the girl reflexively, Rinslet looked up.

"I-It's an earthquake?"

"Earthquakes do not occur in this «Abandoned City»."

The girl shook her head.

"Very likely, a powerful spirit is rampaging on the ground surface."

"A powerful spirit?"

Rinslet's expression froze.

On the surface, the final round of the «Blade Dance» was in full swing.

Perhaps, Kamito and the others were facing a crisis right this moment.

"...What is it?"

"It's no time for me to be dilly dallying here like this."

Rinslet stood up. Although she wanted to learn more about this spirit who bore a young girl's appearance, it was clearly not the occasion for this.

...In any case, she had to leave this underground maze to search for her comrades.

Then--

The girl wiped her mouth using the sleeve of her priestess uniform and stood up lightly.

"...Follow me."

"Eh?"

"The exit, I'll show you."



Kamito and Ellis shifted to some nearby ruins away from the place they had been staying earlier.

Staying in one spot was not a wise idea because as soon as an elementalist skilled in espionage spotted them, barriers and other traps could be set.

Compared to the «Tempest» where it was advantageous to establish and defend a «stronghold» as early as possible, the «Cross Fire» required completely different tactics.

"Is the poison all gone?"

Lying down on his back against the stone floor, Kamito asked.

"Yeah, I feel much better... All thanks to you."

Ellis blushed in response and nodded.

"However, uh, I hope you do not get the wrong idea. J-Just now, it was all because of the aphrodisiac from the poison! O-Only because of it, did that kind of shameless behavior..."

"...Y-Yeah, I understand."

Recalling what had happened during the poison treatment, Kamito became embarrassed as well.

...The two of them avoided eye contact.

"I-It's about time we went to sleep. At this time, it would be best to stay away from outside."

The abandoned city at night was the city of demons where «Archdemon Class» spirits roamed.

In a certain sense, they were even more dangerous than meeting an enemy team.

"Mmmhmm, you are right. Because blade dances in the night are dangerous! O-Of course, even though I mentioned blade dance in the night, do note I am not referring to that particular meaning!"

"...Ellis?"

"H-Hurry and go to sleep! We must leave this place early in the morning."

"You're not going to rest, Ellis?"

"I have rested enough. After all, you were keeping watch all this time. When early morning arrives, I will wake you up."

Wielding «Ray Hawk» in her hand, Ellis shook her head.

Kamito could not help but smile wryly.

"This is totally fine for me. In past missions, there were times when I went days without sleep."

"Missions?"

"Uh yeah... It was back during the days at the «Instructional School»."

"...Sorry. I have made you remember unpleasant memories."

"No--"

Kamito scratched his head awkwardly.

The memories he recalled were of the two whom he used to team up with.

Lily Flame and Muir Alenstarl.

These girls, whom he had not seen for four years, had now reappeared as Kamito's enemies.

--Is there no other way of life for the children who grew up in that facility but this?

"...Those two's hearts are probably still sealed and locked away."

By that insane facility that was now destroyed.

Pitying them would be an act of excessive arrogance.

(--I had Restia.)

Without her, Kamito's hands would probably be completely stained with bloodshed.

Hands that were not for protecting precious companions--

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble -- !

Suddenly, the ground shook intensely.

"Wha!" "...Hmm!"

The quake sent Kamito tumbling forward and falling into Ellis.

Burying his face into a soft mountainous valley, he was about to suffocate.

"Uwah! K-Kamito, what are you doing! I-I am not quite ready yet..."

"S-Sorry... No wait, what on earth is happening--?"

As he lifted his head up from Ellis' bosom, in the next instant--

BOOM...!

The ceiling of the ruins suddenly vanished.

"...!"

As if sliced open by a sharp blade.

Appearing right above was the starry night sky of «Astral Zero».

And also--

A gigantic and vicious flame demon, wielding a fiery whip.

"A demon flame spirit...!"

On the shoulder of the vicious demon that spewed forth scorching flames--

Sat a girl dressed in the Theocracy's military uniform.

Innocent eyes of pure blue. Ash-gray hair tied into twintails on the sides of her head.

"Muir..."

"Onii-sama, let's play♪"

The «Monster» of the «Instructional School» smiled adorably towards Kamito.

Chapter Seven

Cross Fire

"...!"

The earth was shaking violently.

As Kamito and Ellis were rendered speechless, above them, a demon shrouded in crimson flames let loose a deep roar.

The atmosphere trembled and the sweeping gust of scorching air seared skin.

Gazing up at the massive demon overhead, Kamito groaned.

"Muir..."

"What is it, Onii-sama? You don't want to play with Muir?"

The innocently smiling girl -- Muir Alenstarl.

A snake pattern was entwined around her right arm, glowing ominously.

This was not a spirit seal.

Rather, for this girl known as the «Monster», this was the abnormal ability she was born with -- «Jester's Vise».

In order to control this abnormal ability, a «Cursed Armament Seal» had been implanted.

"If you want to play, isn't it a bit late at night?"

"Ara, Muir likes playing at night."

Muir licked her lips.

"...Ellis, jump quickly!"

Kamito instantly yelled.

The giant demon flame spirit casually swung the flaming whip.

Accompanied by a massive boom, the rubble on the ground exploded and rained down as scorching lava.

(...W-What kind of strength is this!?)

Jumping into the air, Kamito swallowed hard.

The ground was split apart as if it had suffered an earthquake as well as becoming scorched and burned tragically.

Although there were similarities, the demon flame spirit's whip was closer to a blunt weapon like a club compared to Claire's «Flametongue» which included the traits of a slashing weapon.

...Even without a direct hit, getting swept in the wake of the weapon's aftershock was probably enough to kiss goodbye to this world.

If that kind of thing keeps being swung unhindered--

(How utterly terrifying...)

Moving along the slanting wall of the ruins, Kamito jumped repeatedly. As a first step, it was imperative to find high ground to seek refuge from the flames. Naturally, he realized that this would not last for long--

"Kamito!"

Ellis caught up to him using «Flight» magic.

Landing by Kamito's side, she glared at the demon flame spirit that dyed the entire dark night red.

"...What a terrifying spirit. Most likely, it is a tactical-class militarized spirit."

"Yeah. Muir is an expert amongst militarized spirit users."

Back when Kamito was teamed up with her at the «Instructional School», her main responsibility was large-scale destruction.

In terms of pure destructive power, Muir's ability even surpassed Kamito.

"Fufu, as expected of Onii-sama. To think you escaped «Valaraukar»'s attack."

Sitting on the demon flame spirit's shoulder, Muir laughed with delight.

--Suddenly, her merciless blue eyes were turned towards Ellis.

"Ponytail-neechan. Leave Onii-sama's side immediately. Within two seconds."

"...!"

This was the gaze of a merciless murderer.

Feeling the immobilizing intensity of the killing intent, Ellis faltered for an instant. However.

--Refuse."

"Hmm?"

"...I-I said I refuse!"

She glared back at Muir straight on.

No, not only did she do that--

"E-Ellis, what on earth are you doing!?"

"S-Shut up!"

Blushing, Ellis even went as far as to embrace Kamito's arm tightly.

"...I-I will never leave!"

"Ellis..."

Kamito's arm was sandwiched between her supple breasts.

...Despite the kind of situation they were in currently, Kamito could not help but feel his heart racing.

--At this time.

"Eh, I see--"

The air that was being surrounded by the demon flame spirit's heat instantly froze.

"You really want to die that badly, Onee-chan?"

Muir's blue eyes lost their luster as the «Cursed Armament Seal» on her right arm shone with red light.

Instantly, «Valaraukar» roared as if going mad.

"Very well. Before I play with Onii-sama, I will play my fill with you first."

Muir smiled innocently.

"I will string you up naked like a puppet, humiliating you nonstop in Onii-sama's view until you scream and beg in pain. Then I'll have you drawn and quartered. Finally, I'll incinerate you completely into ashes!"

Intense flames spewed out from the demon's black lava-like body.

The flaming whip traced out a red trail as it swung down, looking as though it was ripping the atmosphere apart.

Ellis instantly released Kamito and jumped from the ground.

"I am the witch who gallops across the blue sky -- «Air Wings»!"

Enveloped in wind conjured by spirit magic, she flew through the gaps in the scorching flames.

"Ellis!"

Kamito was just about to rush over--

Seeing Ellis turn her head back and gestured with her eyes, he instantly understood her plan.

(...She's deliberately provoking Muir.)

During this time while Ellis acted as bait, he was to defeat «Valaraukar».

Because they had partnered up in the Sylphid Knights all this time, Kamito was able to understand immediately.

"...This is totally reckless."

That said, Kamito could not afford to waste this opportunity that she created.

Kamito adjusted his grip on the «Demon Slayer» in his hand.

--We're up, Est."

He infused all his divine power into the blade.

As if illuminating the entire dark night, «Terminus Est» gave off dazzling brilliance.

The energy exhausted during the battle with the «Forsaken Spirits» had almost recovered completely.

Slicing through the flames, Kamito rushed forward towards the roaring demon flame spirit.

Being able to head straight forward was a good thing, seeing as the surroundings had turned into a sea of fire. Running along the ruins that provided a foothold above the ground surface that was being devoured by flowing lava, he searched for a path to approach.

A casual swing of the flaming whip struck the ground, pulverizing the ruins.

Whether it was due to madness brought on by the power of the «Jester's Vise» or the original spirit itself was unstable, the demon flame spirit's skill with the whip was extremely crude and hence it was very easy to predict its trajectory.

Compared to Claire's splendid whip techniques, it was as far apart as heaven and earth.

(That said--)

The whip's overwhelming destructive power completely pulverized the surrounding territory, almost making up for the crudeness of technique.

Even if one escaped the whip's direct attack, a grazing blow from the super high temperature flames produced would cause fatal injuries.

"This reminds me of the time when I soloed an Archdemon class spirit..."

Wiping the sweat off his brow, Kamito groaned.

Striking down incoming masses of flying lava, he closed in.

If he did not hurry -- amidst these intense heat waves, Ellis could not endure for long.

Or perhaps, even before that, Muir might recover her calm rational judgment.

This was Kamito's second time fighting the «Instructional School»'s Number Two, Muir Alenstarl the «Monster». The first battle happened back at «Ragna Ys»--

She was commanding the powerful annihilation spirit «Tiamat» that time.

(Although I barely pulled through last time...)

It was because Kamito's combat style was well-suited to countering spirits geared towards wide area damage.

In terms of pure power, Muir was superior. Furthermore, this «Valaraukar» was most likely a militarized spirit intended for single combat.

In a direct confrontation, it was not just troublesome for one would be overwhelmed by its strength.

Furthermore--

(...Back then, Muir didn't seem like she was serious in wanting to fight me.)

«Valaraukar» roared as raging flames spewed forth from all over its body.

"...!"

Kamito instantly halted and stabbed the «Demon Slayer» into the ground.

Immediately, an intense shockwave reached Kamito.

Heated by the flames, the air swept forth like a storm.

"Guh... What is this power..."

Holding on for dear life to the sword stabbed into the ground, Kamito looked around for Ellis' position.

"Ellis!"

--He found her instantly.

Struck squarely by the shockwave in midair, Ellis was now falling towards the ground.

Below her, the ground had already turned into a sea of lava.

(...I must make it in time!)

Pulling his sword out, Kamito performed a rolling maneuver and rushed forward.

--At this moment, the whip swung down, forming a barrier of flame to obstruct his path.

"Don't interfere, Onii-sama. Muir is currently playing with that Onee-chan."

"...!"

Sitting on the flame demon's shoulder, Muir giggled.

"...Kamito, I am fine!"

Ellis' voice came from the other side of the flame barrier.

...It looked like she managed to use «Flight» magic in time to avoid the dangers of crashing down.

Kamito breathed a sigh of relief.

"Ara, how resilient, Onee-chan."

Muir's gray-colored hair began to stand on end from anger.

Kamito did not fail to notice her slightly trembling hands.

(She's over straining herself...)

Muir's abnormal power -- the «Jester's Vise», had a critical shortcoming.

Namely, duration.

Commanding such a powerful militarized spirit also placed an extraordinary burden upon Muir herself.

If the spirit did not break first from her usage, Muir would suffer the fate of destruction herself.

(...At most three, no, five minutes or so.)

Running around as he stalled for time -- suddenly, this thought occurred to Kamito.

(...No, that's not going to work.)

Instantly, he shook his head to reject the idea.

...Retreating under such circumstances was impossible.

Escape routes were all sealed by the collapsed ruins and the barrier of flame. Ellis probably could escape using flight magic but fleeing while dodging the flaming whip was very difficult.

"This leaves breaking through by force only."

Kamito readied the «Demon Slayer» in a stance and slashed towards the barrier of flame in front of him.

These were not the same flames as the ones Claire usually used when going easy on someone.

Instead, these were super high temperature flames that turned everything into charcoal on contact.

Kamito charged towards the flame barrier.

"...Onii-sama?!"

Muir cried out anxiously.

Was she staying wary of Kamito's apparently reckless behavior or was she worrying about his safety--

In any case, Kamito continued to accelerate nonchalantly and infused divine power into the sacred sword's blade.

"Absolute Blade Arts, Fourth Form -- «Blaze Slash»!"

With a vigorous intensity, he unleashed the attack in one breath. Turning himself into a tornado, he flew into the flames.

This was a special sword skill for countering the flame attribute by using the vortex of wind generated from the slash to sweep away the flames and absorb them.

Charging to the other side of the flame barrier, Kamito found Ellis waiting right there for him.

"Ellis, we're up!"

"Yes--!"

Holding «Ray Hawk» in her hand, Ellis flew into the fiery crimson sky.

"...Tsk, what a foolish Onee-chan. You will be struck down no matter how many times you try!"

Muir's «Cursed Armament Seal» glowed ominously.

With the release of the «Jester's Vise»'s power, the flame demon began to rampage.

Its roar turned into a shockwave fired towards Ellis.

--Evil wind, go forth and rampage."

Ellis' «Ray Hawk» gave off an intense flash of light.

The blades of wind cancelled out the shockwave and headed straight for the demon flame spirit.

"Something like that can't possibly work against «Valaraukar»!"

Muir was right. The wild blades of wind were all deflected by the skin of lava.

As expected, an ordinary attack could not harm the spirit.

However.

"Of course I know that!"

Ellis' attack was simply a smokescreen.

During this time, Kamito had closed in on the flame demon by traveling along the ground.

"...Wha!?"

Leaping along the ground, he swiftly approached beneath the legs of the demon flame spirit.

Like an axe for chopping a great tree, the «Demon Slayer» was swung.

In the next instant.

"Absolute Blade Arts, First Form -- «Purple Lightning»!"

Kamito unleashed a sword technique for localized destruction, exploding at «Valaraukar»'s ankle.

R-ROOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAR--!

Losing balance, the demon flame spirit's massive body swayed as if about to fall.

Even though it was a tactical-class militarized spirit, this result was perfectly reasonable after suffering an attack from the strongest elemental waffe of the steel attribute, «Terminus Est».

Roaring angrily, the flame demon collapsed upon its knees on the burning ground.

The tremors produced caused surrounding ruins to collapse one after another.

To avoid being flattened by the gigantic body, Kamito swiftly disengaged. Distancing himself, he readied his sword once more.

"Muir. I'm sorry but we can't stay and play with you any further."

"..."

Muir's blue eyes gazed calmly at Kamito.

The ash-gray twintails fluttered in the wind blowing against her.

"I see, so Onii-sama too."

"...Hmm?"

"Onii-sama too, hopes to play with Muir."

"...!"

The light vanished from Muir's blue eyes.

Instantly, the kneeling demon produced an intense flash of light from its mouth, engulfing Kamito's body.

"Kamito!"

Ellis' shout sounded like a mournful scream, however.

"...Guh, I never expected it to have an attack like that...!"

Seeing Kamito emerge from the debris, Ellis instantly breathed a sigh of relief.

After all, it was an attack made by the spirit before it regained balance, hence Kamito managed to evade successfully at the very last moment.

Despite the pain from burns causing him to grimace, Kamito continued to grip the «Demon Slayer» tightly.

«Valaraukar» propped up one knee, intending to stand up again.

--The only chance was now.

"...Escaping will not work, Onii-sama. If you are unable to move, then just promise you will never ever leave Muir's side again."

Branded upon Muir's arm, the «Cursed Armament Seal» bled profusely.

...From the way it looks, she was being devoured by her abnormal power and gradually going out of control. If she continued to use the «Jester's Vise»'s abnormal power in this manner, she could die in the worst case scenario.

(...As if anyone was going to let that happen!)

Kamito made a flying leap.

«Valaraukar»'s flaming whip proceeded to sweep the scorching hot land.

Fragments of debris flew and scattered. --However, Kamito had long departed from that location.

In that instant, Kamito had sneaked his way into the bosom of the demon flame spirit who was kneeling on one knee.

(--This next strike shall determine the victor!)

From the ground, it was impossible to launch an effective attack against the gigantic demon flame spirit.

However, Kamito was confident.

"Kamito, catch!"

From midair, Ellis aimed beside Kamito's feet and threw «Ray Hawk».

Enveloped in a vortex of wind, the spear tip penetrated the ground unerringly.

This was the perfect opportunity created by the tacit understanding within the team's vanguard combo.

"I'm sorry, I'm borrowing this!"

Kamito stepped onto the shaft of the spear that was embedded into the ground at a slant -- In that very instant.

--O Storm, release thy power!"

Ellis chanted the words of release.

Boom -- !

An intense cyclone instantly began to blow, shooting the spear out from the ground with explosive force.

Standing upon the spear shaft, Kamito flew high into the sky. Then the instant «Ray Hawk» flew above «Valaraukar»'s head, Kamito leaped from the spear.

"How could this be possible...?!"

Muir stared wide-eyed.

"Muir, let me tell you. This is called a team battle."

No matter how powerful a militarized spirit was, there were limits to solitary power.

Kamito raised the «Demon Slayer» in midair.

Immediately--

--Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance, Eighteen Consecutive Strikes!"

The Absolute Blade Arts' anti-spirit technique was unleashed explosively.

Crushing, piercing, slashing, slashing, slashing -- an eighteen-hit combo was delivered in flowing succession.

With each intense eruption of sparks, the demon flame spirit's body was split open.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhh!"

When the final slash landed on the dead center of its skull, in that very instant--

«Valaraukar»'s gigantic body immediately crashed towards the ground.

However, it was not yet completely destroyed. Such astounding endurance.

"Guh..."

Panting heavily, Kamito supported himself using the upright sword against the ground.

The strain on the body from using the Absolute Blade Arts was extraordinary.

--At this time.

"No way..."

Amidst the sea of flame, Muir murmured, her face all pale.

"Muir..."

"Muir's spirit, how could it lose -- Guh..."

The pallidity of her face was most likely not only due to the shock of losing to Kamito.

(Starting from when she first started controlling the demon flame spirit, over five minutes have already passed...)

Prolonged usage of the «Jester's Vise» caused Muir's body to reach its limit.

Bright red blood dripped continuously from the «Cursed Armament Seal» branded on her right arm.

"It's not over... It's not over yet, Onii-sama."

"Stop it. If you continue like this your life will be in danger."

Kamito shrugged slightly, then--

He caught Muir in both arms as she looked like she was about to collapse.

"...Onii...-sama!?"

Muir's body was instantly drained of all strength.

"W-Why..."

"...Muir, I'm sorry. For leaving you alone all this time."

"Onii-sama...!"

He heard Muir's gasp by his ear.

The «Instructional School»'s «Monster» -- Muir Alenstarl.

Having lost her spirit, she was just a common little girl.

(...In the past, I never noticed this fact.)

He lightly stroked her ash-gray hair.

"Ah, oooh..."

Muir curled up her body as if feeling ticklish.

"...Onii-sama, that's no fair. To think you would do this."

Muir pouted sullenly.

Kamito turned his gaze to her right arm, only to find that the «Cursed Armament Seal»'s glow had vanished.



"...Muir, I told you so already."

In a tower far away from the battlefield of swirling flames of conflagration.

Lily Flame bit her lip hard.

She had stayed in this location all this time, watching over Muir's blade dance.

Providing reinforcements was impossible. Spirits driven by the «Jester's Vise» into a rampage were unable to distinguish friend from foe. For a demon tree spirit whose weakness was fire, even approaching was impossible.

Failing to stop Muir could be considered a major blunder.

After Cardinal -- Ren Ashbell, Muir was «Team Inferno»'s next strongest combatant. The original plan was to send her against elementalists of Leonora's level or above.

(With this, Cardinal...)

Of course, Lily never expected her lord to be defeated in battle.

Whether the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor» or the «Sacred Spirit Knights», neither of them were her match.

However--

(...Cardinal's body cannot fight for long durations.)

Lily had noticed this weakness she was hiding.

Precisely because of it, she handed over the responsibility of annihilating enemy teams to Muir during the «Tempest».

(Should I take Muir back, no--)

Although Kamito was injured all over already, defeating him was impossible.

That was how vast their difference in level was.

Absolutely impossible to alleviate, an overwhelming difference in power.

(Now was the time to abandon Muir and report back to Cardinal--)

--Suddenly at this time.

"...!"

A presence was felt from behind.

"...Who is it?!"

Lily called out and threw a knife into the darkness--

"Fufu, isn't this a little rude against a fellow teammate?"

"You are--"

The girl appeared casually, playing with the knife she had caught.

Her blue hair seemed especially vivid against the contrast of the night. An exotic foreign outfit that exposed her lightly tanned complexion.

Bright red lips were shaped seductively in a smile of mockery.

"Sjora Kahn--"

Lily groaned in her throat.

The Theocracy's princess gave off an atmosphere with an inexplicable sense of dissonance.

(...What is this?)

There was a bone-chilling sense of intimidating presence.

(...I am feeling afraid?)

The witch was not like this previously.

Although she was unpleasant, she never gave off such an ominous aura.

(What on earth...)

The witch walked over to the edge of the tower and looked at the burning flames afar. Jeering, she said:

"Looks like that little lass has no idea how to use «Valaraukar» properly."

"What are you talking about--"

"Watch carefully and quietly. I shall show you the real way to use that thing."

Sjora raised her hand lightly and drew a magic circle in the air with her finger.

"...!"

Lily's eyes widened in shock.

It was a complicated three-dimensional magic circle -- primitive magic once used in ancient times.

--Awaken, ghosts imprisoned in the city of demons. Hereby revive from flames of conflagration."

Immediately--

The demon flame spirit roared again just as it was about to exhaust its strength.



Just as Rinslet was wondering how long the underground ruins extended until--

--It's here."

Leading the way in front, the girl suddenly stopped.

Rinslet tilted her head.

"...? This is just a wall."

"These ruins have a number of secret doors protected by magic."

The girl pressed her hand against the wall and murmured something softly.

"...?"

At first, Rinslet thought it was a spirit language incantation but then again, it did not seem like it.

Rinslet had no idea, but this was precisely the «High Ancient» language that was taught only to high ranking princess maidens.

Very soon, the designs carved on the stone wall glowed with blue-white light. Accompanied by a low rumbling, the wall opened up.

Although there was still a flight of stairs beyond the door, at least a faint source of light could be seen somewhere in there.

These steps really seemed like they would lead to the surface.

(...Looks like fire light, actually.)

An intense blade dance was probably in progress on the surface.

"You can reach outside by continuing along here."

"What about you...?"

"...I already said. I cannot go outside."

The girl displayed a dream-like smile and pointed her finger towards the passageway.

Instantly, with a popping sound -- something resembling a blue-white electrical current burst.

"...!"

The girl frowned due to the pain.

"Why would this..."

"It's okay, after all, I already gave up."

"N-No way, how can this be acceptable!?"

Rinslet held the girl's hand. For her to be imprisoned in a place like this when she had lost her memory and knowledge of her true identity, it was completely unacceptable.

"R-Right! One of my teammates is a princess maiden specializing in ritual magic. If she were here, perhaps she could release the seal that binds you!"

"...Thank you, Miss Princess Maiden of Ice."

However, the girl quietly shook her head.

"Your pancakes were very delicious. Although as a spirit I don't suffer from hunger, I do wish for a tasty treat once in a while."

She smiled once more.

"Miss Spirit..."

Rinslet bit her lip hard.

"Miss Princess Maiden, you are a person with a good heart. Hence I shall make an exception and tell you my name."

"...Name? Didn't you lose your memory?"

"All I remember is my name. --This is my only treasure. Hence I will only tell it to precious friends. Amongst humans, you are the first one."

As if about to reveal a great and important secret, she drew her tiny lips close to Rinslet's ear.

"Iseria--"

"...Eh?"

"Iseria Seaward. That is my name."

"This name, could it really be!?"

Rinslet's eyes widened greatly--

But as soon as the girl withdrew from Rinslet, her figure vanished into the darkness.

◇

ROOOOOOOAAAAAAAR--!

The roaring caused the ground to shake.

Amidst howling flames, «Valaraukar»'s gigantic body slowly stood upright.

"Impossible, why would this happen...!?"

Held in Kamito's arms, Muir muttered in shock.

Muir's right arm's «Cursed Armament Seal» did not react.

In other words, the demon flame spirit was not currently under her control.

"...Has it gone out of control?"

Ellis swiftly released defensive wind magic.

Blowing away the surrounding flames, the flame demon's appearance was fully exposed.

As jet black flames spewed out from all over its body, the demon flame spirit stood up.

The scorching flames charred the dark night, smoking the ground black.

(...Th-That's not right.)

Kamito noticed.

(Those aren't even flames at all...)

Pouring out from the demon flame spirit's gigantic body was--

Lamenting swarms of ghosts.

"...Just what is going on?"

As if answering Kamito's doubts--

"Kamito, the demon flame spirit has been possessed by «Forsaken Spirits»."

Est spoke up, having returned to human form without him noticing.

"...Possessed? A militarized spirit of that level?"

"Yes. That demon's body is likely possessed by thousands of spirits at least. --With so much hatred and resentment accumulated, no spirit can resist no matter how strong."

"...To have thousands of them!? Why would there be so many spirits--"

"Now that you mention it, «Valaraukar» did devour massive numbers of that type of spirit."

In response to Ellis' shocked exclamation, Muir replied.

"...Est, is that «Valaraukar» one of those «Spirit Weapons» you mentioned earlier?"

"Yes. Although it is not within my memory, based on the fact that so much resentment from the «Forsaken Spirits» has gathered, it is very likely true--"

Est nodded lightly.

ROAR, ROOOOAAAAR--!

Black flames swirled intensely. The one-armed demon no longer looked anything similar to its original form.

It currently resembled a seething mass of hatred.

Suddenly, Kamito recalled the image of a monster of darkness.

«*Nepenthes Lore*» -- despite the fact that the demon flame spirit standing upright before their eyes was far more massive than that monster, the impression they gave off was surprisingly similar.

"Kamito, we have to get out of this place."

"Yeah."

Hearing Ellis' sharp call, Kamito nodded in response.

Carrying Muir in his arms like this, he turned back.

"...!"

He suddenly halted in his steps.

Without them noticing, innumerable swarms of ghosts had gathered in the surroundings.

"This is terrible..."

Perhaps they had resonated with the resentment released by «*Valaraukar*» and gathered here.

"Breaking through is impossible, right..."

After all, contamination resulted from mere contact and severely depleted divine power.

Even if a break in the encirclement could be opened up for an instant, it was still quite hard to find their way when the density of spirits was so high.

In their current state with Muir incapacitated, Kamito did not dare do anything rashly.

...Come to think of it, flying in the air would be even more dangerous.

If one were to be dragged into that darkness, there would be no coming back alive.

"Ellis--"

Kamito turned towards her.

"W-What!? W-Why are you suddenly staring at me like that...!"

"I entrust Muir to you. I will go defeat that demon flame spirit."

"Wha..."

Kamito gently laid down Muir from his arms.

"...Can you stand on your own yet?"

"What does Onii-sama take Muir for?"

Tossing her ash-gray hair, Muir shyly averted her gaze.

"Furthermore, Muir does not need the protection of that busty Onee-chan over there. Even without a spirit to command, Muir has no trouble protecting herself."

"...Ooh, th-this has nothing to do with chest size, okay!?"

--Say, this isn't really the time for leisurely chatting."

Kamito turned towards the demon flame spirit.

The black flames spewing out from «Valaraukar» burned even more intensely

...Burning to this extent, it was only a matter of time now.

--Est, I am relying on you. Please lend your power to me again."

"Yes, Kamito. But--"

Despite nodding, Est still gazed at Kamito with a worried expression.

...Kamito knew very well what Est wanted to say.

Currently, his right arm was hurting intensely. The muscles in his entire body were screaming.

The anti-spirit technique of the Absolute Blade Arts, the «Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance», had exploited his body to the limit.

This move was only supposed to be used roughly once a day at most.

Furthermore, it was a skill meant to be used when dual wielding.

Using it one-handed caused even greater strain on the body.

(Am I able to use it one more time...?)

Kamito clenched his right fist.

Otherwise, there is--

(--The Absolute Blade Art's secret technique, «Last Strike».)

Inherited from Greyworth, the strongest sword skill that could even defeat the «Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance».

However--

(...No good. That is a countering sword skill for use against an elementalist. It won't work against that demon flame spirit.)

Besides, Kamito still had not learned that secret technique completely.

Trying to use it here was far too risky.

"Do you want to use «Flight» magic to get close and decide the battle in one strike?"

Faced with Ellis' suggestion, Kamito shook his head.

Ellis aside, Kamito had no ability to control «Flight» magic.

Although rushing over in a straight line was possible, doing that will surely result in getting struck down by that flaming whip.

"But there is no way to approach the demon flame spirit from the ground."

"..."

--Indeed.

The black flames surrounding «Valaraukar» were burning intensely.

As soon as he touched those flames, Kamito's body would be contaminated and he would no longer be able to sustain Est.

"What should I do--"

Suddenly, at this moment.

Filled with an aura of disaster, «Valaraukar»'s eyes focused on them.

GROOOOOOWWWWWL...!

Accompanied by a sound of spiteful resentment that sounded like it came from underground, its mouth glowed with the color of intense scorching heat--

--It's coming!"

Just as Kamito yelled out.

A heat beam was shot.

Mere protective magic of wind was nowhere enough to defend against the overwhelming raging torrent of flame.

"...Get down!"

In a hurry, Kamito wrapped his arms around the three girls and jumped, pushing them all to the ground. Although it was not too effective, at least it was better than being bathed in flames.

"Freezing fangs of ice, go forth and pierce -- «Freezing Arrow»!"

Numerous arrows of ice flew in from afar, striking the heat beam.

A massive explosion occurred before their eyes.

"...Guh!"

The violent wind swept up debris, blowing Kamito's body away.

(...Just now, could that be!?)

Steadying his shaken consciousness, Kamito turned his gaze towards where the arrow was shot from.

"Phew, what perfect timing!"

--Over there.

On top of the collapsed ruins was a lovely lady with long platinum-blonde hair fluttering in the wind.

Her hand was holding an elegant shining arrow of ice.

Her pose was the very image of a valkyrie from paintings.

"...Rinslet!?"

Kamito yelled with his eyes staring wide open.

"Where on earth did she appear from!?"

The surrounding area was supposed to be heavily surrounded by swarming «Forsaken Spirits».

"Hmph, I was thinking I could finally leave those underground ruins, only to discover a sea of flames after getting out, and even got chased by these inexplicable spirits, I've had enough of all this!"

Rinslet snarled angrily with her hand at her waist.

"I-I see..."

...Apparently she had suffered in various ways in some place Kamito had no idea of.

--However, let's put that aside for now.

(With this, we finally have a chance for victory...)

"Kamito!" "Onii-sama!"

From amongst the rubble, Ellis and Muir crawled out.

"Seriously, w-why did you have to overextend yourself like that!?"

"...Sigh, Onii-sama is always like that."

Ellis pouted while Muir sighed.

"Now that we have converged with Rinslet, perhaps we have a chance."

"Hmm..."

Hearing that, Ellis turned her gaze over towards Rinslet.

She was currently breaking up swarms of ghosts using her bow and walking over here.

"It's just one person more. Nothing's going to change."

Muir frowned in exasperation, but--

"That's not correct."

Kamito shook his head.

"Increasing from two to three people raises our team's power to a whole different level. Our «Team Scarlet», that's the kind of team we've got."

--Indeed."

Ellis readied «Ray Hawk».

"Kamito, put your hand--"

Standing beside her, Kamito held Est's hand once more.

"Let's go, Est. Once again, please lend me your power."

—The Dispassionate Queen of Steel, the sacred sword that destroys evil!

—Now form a sword of steel and be the power in my hand!

As the release of the elemental waffe was chanted, Est's figure instantly dissipated into the air as particles of light--

The «Demon Slayer» -- Terminus Est appeared in Kamito's right hand.

"Huff, huff... Kamito-san!"

Rinslet arrived, out of breath.

"We're going to end this in one strike, okay?"

"Yes!" "My thoughts exactly!"

Ellis and Rinslet nodded simultaneously.

«Valaraukar» roared and prepared to fire off another heat beam.

--I won't let you succeed!"

Instantly, Kamito kicked the ground and sprinted.

Wielding the «Demon Slayer» horizontally, he charged towards the roaring black flames.

"Rinslet, we will open up a path!"

"Understood!"

Rinslet readied her bow elemental waffe and stretched the bowstring to its max.

Softly chanting a spirit language incantation, she infused the maximum amount of divine power into the arrow.

--Capable of piercing the scales of dragons, O Sword of Sagacity!

--Now turn into endless blades to vanquish mine enemy!

This was a high level magic skill for multiplying the power of «Freezing Arrow» at the cost of a longer activation time.

The same instant Rinslet released the arrow--

Innumerable shining blades of ice rained down upon the black flames.

At the same time, Ellis also swung «Ray Hawk».

--Rampaging demonic wind, you are the one who covets severity, you are the embodiment of absolute tyranny!

--In accordance with your greed, sweep away mine enemies!

As a rumbling vortex formed, a great howling tempest rampaged.

" "O Winds of Ice, perform a dance of madness -- «Ice Storm»!" "

This was a combination magic skill that made use of the mutual interaction of ice and wind attributes.

Strong gales infused with cold air instantly froze the black flames, shattering them -- !

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Kamito rushed forward head on.

He poured all his divine power into the «Demon Slayer», causing it to flash with silver-white radiance.

This was the only chance.

But it was enough.

The decisive opportunity created by the two girls was definitely not going to be wasted.

Kamito took a flying leap and landed on the giant body of «Valaraukar» that was akin to lava.

From the knee to its arm, then from its arm to its shoulder -- and finally from the shoulder to its head, Kamito leaped three dimensionally.

As he slashed apart the black flames and lamenting ghosts spewing forth from its body--

--I'm sorry but you'll have to rest in peace this time."

Kamito whispered in midair.

Then--

"Absolute Blade Arts, Destructive Form -- Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance - Twenty-One Consecutive Strikes!"

Unleashing the Absolute Blade Arts, the demon flame spirit was smashed to complete pulverization.

Epilogue

“Haa, haa...”

—Kamito and the others had fought with «Valaraukar», and at that moment.

Fianna felt a strange sense of uneasiness, and went towards the heart of the abandoned city «Megidoa».

Her perception at times like this was often right. She, who held unparalleled talent as a princess maiden, would never neglect her intuition.

(It'll be good if this was just needless anxiety...)

She was running on a path covered by countless trees and shrubs in the darkness of the night, and at that moment.

“Kya!”

Suddenly, something small came flying in front of her.

The instant she stopped her footsteps, she ended up tripping and falling over. Unfortunately, she did not happen to have the reflexes like her female teammates.

“Ouch... W-What...?”

While she rubbed her twisted foot, she looked up and—

“Meow...”

“...Scarlet!?”

What was there was Claire's hellcat spirit.

She noticed that it somewhat seemed smaller than usual.

...It might have been exhausting its power.

“...Why are you here? Could it be that Claire is near here?”

Fianna asked in rapid succession.

However, Scarlet turned around, and instantly disappeared into the rows of ruins.

“W-Wait...!”

Fianna stood up in a fluster.

Her twisted foot hurt, but now wasn’t the time for that.

Finally, she might have discovered the whereabouts of her teammates.

Chasing after Scarlet’s swinging tail, she ran on the pathway, and finally exited at an opened-up area, where large amount of rubble had accumulated.

“This is...!?”

Fianna widely opened her dim-colored eyes.

The sight expanded before her eyes, that was—

The ground had been gouged out in a big way into the shape of a bowl. There were flames blazing everywhere.

The historic ruins in the surroundings melted into something like lava, and no longer contain their original shape.

...Just how extra-high of heat did it basked in to end up like this?

“What happened here?”

She muttered in a daze, at that time.

“...Hn...”

She heard a gasping-like groan coming from somewhere.

“...!?”

Fianna looked around in a fluster.

Then, she saw Scarlet's tail swaying at the other side of a crumpled wall.

She hurriedly went around to the other side of the wall.

"...Claire!?"

She discovered Claire lying dead tired at the wall.

"Claire, hey, get yourself together!"

"...Hn...Uu..."

It seemed like her consciousness was hazy and it also seemed like she didn't notice Fianna.

Seemingly worried, the hellcat spirit was going in circles around her.

Upon taking a spirit ore from her uniform pocket, Fianna pressed it onto Claire's chest.

The sacred light, possessing healing powers, faintly shone.

"Claire, it's me. ...Can you speak?"

"...Hn... Fia...nna...?"

Within the empty ruby eyes of hers, a small flame of consciousness lit.

"What on earth happened?"

"...Quickly, the demon sword... to... Kamito..."

"...Demon sword?"

Fianna frowned dubiously.

Then, Claire placed her shaky hand behind her back, and took out one sword.

"...! Don't tell me, this is..."

It was a familiar demon sword of darkness. ...Even its appearance was subtly different, but there wasn't a doubt, it was Ren Ashbell's elemental waffe, the «Vorpal Sword».

"Claire, why do you have...?"

Fianna asked back, and at that moment.

"I should have had already warn you not to appear in front of me again, Fianna Ray Ordesia."

"...!"

In an instant, her heart was grabbed by that voice.

"..."

She calmly gulped.

While feeling cold sweat spouting out from her whole body, Fianna turned behind.

There was a crimson flame violently blazing.

She appeared from within that flame.

She had glamorous long black hair and a deep-crimson-red mask that was like scraped out of a burning flame.

She wore a military uniform of the Empire, and her body was clad in sparks fluttering down.

Leader of «Team Inferno». Strongest Blade Dancer—Ren Ashbell.

...No. Fianna already knew her true identity.

(Rubia-sama...)

She had been secretly maneuvering in the shadows so far, so why did she show herself at this timing?

—Her motive was obvious.

(...«The Darkness Queen».)

Fianna stood up to protect Claire who had fallen.

"...I will not hand over Claire."

She knew it was a futile resistance.

Nevertheless, she couldn't leave Claire, who was vaguely conscious, behind and escape.

"—Don't interfere. You'll understand it one day."

"Rubia-sama, I don't understand what beliefs you have. However, if you're going to hurt my friends—I'll... stop you!"

Agilely drawing a magic formation in the air, she summoned «Georgios».

Instantly unsheathing its sword, the knight spirit rushed at her.

"It's futile. Your resolution will never reach me."

—The flames throbbed. There was a flame that was clearly different from the surrounding flames, a freezing blue flame.

The moment that flame touched its armor, the whole body of the knight spirit collapsed instantly.

"...!"

The overwhelming difference in power was displayed.

Ren Ashbell was clad in the freezing flame, and her black hair was violently fluttering.

"—Your time is up. I shall welcome the «Darkness Queen» into my hands."

Then, she—

Removed the deep-crimson mask that concealed her face.

Crack The mask landed on the ground and broke.



Crack The mask landed on the ground and broke.

"...!"

Fianna was petrified at that spot and couldn't move.

She had extremely beautiful eyes of ruby that harbored blazing flames.

The glamorous black hair that was a trait of Ren Ashbell gently flared up.

As if the flames were painting over the darkness—

That was the color of her hair during the time she was once called the «Fire Queen».

Elstein red.

At that time—

"...U...g..."

"...!"

There was a groaning voice from behind.

"Claire, no—!"

"...Nee...sama?"

Within her hazy consciousness, Claire muttered, seemingly puzzled.

Both pairs of flame-harboring ruby eyes met, and then—

"Now, let's end everything."

Rubia Elstein opened her mouth.

"—It's time for the awakening of the Demon King."

Afterword

Author

--You have finally called out my name, Master.

I am truly thankful to everyone who bought this book!

I hereby present to you, *Seirei Tsukai no Blade Dance*'s ninth installment, "Cross Fire."

--Defeat Ren Ashbell.

Bearing Greyworth's entrusted wish in his heart, Kamito stepped onto the stage of the final round. Engaging in a blade dance of the night with the beauties in his team, what lies in wait for him in his peak condition of readiness--?

Thick with conspiracies, the «Blade Dance» festival. The intense clash of weaponry, sounding out loud.

Then there is the encounter between the demon sword of darkness and the hell cat girl -- the strongest flames awaken!

Although the previous "Night Before the Finale" was centered on love comedy, this time we begin the final round at last, hence this volume is filled with battles. The main attraction of this volume is the rare teamwork combination between so-and-so and so-and-so. Also, we finally reach the scene for XXXXX's awakening. With Sakura Hanpei-sensei's color illustration, it can even be described as the most intense and unforgettable scene.

As is customary, here some acknowledgements.

First of all Sakura Hanpei-sensei has once again drawn super cute and super cool illustrations. Rubia-oneesama on the cover truly gives me shivers. Whenever the beautiful illustrations are delivered to me, I can't help but dance with delight. I am truly grateful.

As always, we have Umeda Natsuno-sensei's adorable chibi characters. I always look forward to the color page of the table of contents.

Currently serializing the manga version of *Seirei Tsukai no Blade Dance* on Comic Alive is Hyoujyu Issei-sensei. High quality battle scenes, brisk developments, attractive performances -- every time he draws a creation that far surpasses expectations. I am truly thankful. Summed up in one word: Excellent. To readers who have only read the original novel, please do try the manga.

Also, there is Shouji-sama who was responsible for the Seirei series ever since its earliest stages, supporting the work with an editor's burning soul. Thanks to Shouji-san's efforts all along. I am really thankful for the past two years. In the breaking of new ground, I look forward to your performance like a cheetah sprinting across the vast savannah (*meaning the way you always dress in a leopard print coat).

Starting from this volume, there is Narita-sama who started taking on the role of the one in charge. Let all of us of the Seirei team try our best to make this work an even greater success!

And of course, the greatest thanks goes to all the readers who have supported this series all along. The comments returned through the surveys have really really given me great encouragement.

Well then, because the afterword this time is quite long, so I'd like to announce the results of the popularity poll ending with the Volume 8 mobile phone survey. *durarararara*(sound effects)--

Number 10 is the ace of the «Four Gods», Shao Fu. She appeared in a Chinese-style dress in a Volume 8 illustration. Foremost in strength and forthright character amongst the «Four Gods», was that the secret to her popularity? Number 9 is Rinslet Laurenfrost the highborn lady. The number one bride equipped with all sorts of domestic skills. Number 8 is Claire Rouge. Even compared to the members of the team, she shoulders an especially heavy burden of a past, will she one day recover her original smile...? Number 7 is Kazehaya Kamito. Leaving a deep impression with his maid look and being ordered around by Greyworth in Volume 8... Or rather, his cuteness has already reached heroine levels. Number 6 is the expressionless fourteen-year-old, Milla Bassett. Who could have expected her to become a maid in her first appearance? Writing the parts about the

Milla & Mireille combo was quite enjoyable. Number 5 is Fianna Ray Ordesia Her Highness the imperial princess. In Volume 8 while stalking the date, she became Dark Fianna at one point. She is the type whose popularity slowly rises. Number 4 is Ellis Fahrengart. Clearly a serious captain of the knights, but full of dangerous aura when she goes out of control, is that a mistaken impression? Also, her breasts are huge.

.....Although Number 1 has a substantial lead on Numbers 2 and 3, in actual fact the difference from 4 to 9 is quite small. Anyway, now for the countdown of the top three!

Number 3 is the darkness spirit Restia. There was a time when she gave Est a run for her money, but because she had too few appearances in Volume 8, she has now slipped to Number 3. Will she display her power as the legal wife(?) in the future?

Number 2 turns out surprisingly to be someone who jumped from outside tenth place, the dragon knight Leonora Lancaster. I am quite surprised even as the author. Strong, cute, not wearing something -- bearing these three major elements, she will be a strong competitor for Team Scarlet.

And Number 1 is the Unmovable Queen, kneesocks spirit Est. Although she lost the top spot to Ellis once when Volume 3 was released, she has maintained supremacy ever since. Truly magnificent.

The QR code for the popularity poll and cellphone survey is found in the lower left corner. If you have comments, please send them together as well. The author and Sakura Hanpei-sensei are very happy to receive them!

--In any case, we finally reach a climax in the «Blade Dance Festival arc» for the next volume.

Let us meet again in the tenth installment, "The Awakening of the Demon King (tentative)"!

Shimizu Yuu, October 2012

Illustrator

Nice to meet you and welcome back. This is Sakura Hanpei!

Rubia finally makes her appearance in the illustrations!

In actual fact, I racked my brain when drawing her. I had no idea how to get a grasp on her expression...

She seems like a character without any smile at all... It was truly a challenge! I must work harder and practice more...

With that kind of feeling, Seirei Tsukai has brought all sorts of developments...!

What will happen in the next volume... Or perhaps, what exactly is Rubia's goal? I really want to know! Shimizu-sensei, is the content for Volume 10 ready yet...!? (desperate)

Next volume's cover will be a new experiment! (Should be...!)

If everyone looks forward to it, I will be very happy!

This time in the Seirei team, whether Shimizu-sensei, Narita-san the one in charge, or me, we all caught a cold and got sick... Everyone should take better care!

(Narita-san, Shimizu-sensei, I am realy sorry... OTL)

Well then, let's meet again next volume~!

2012.xx 桜はんぺん